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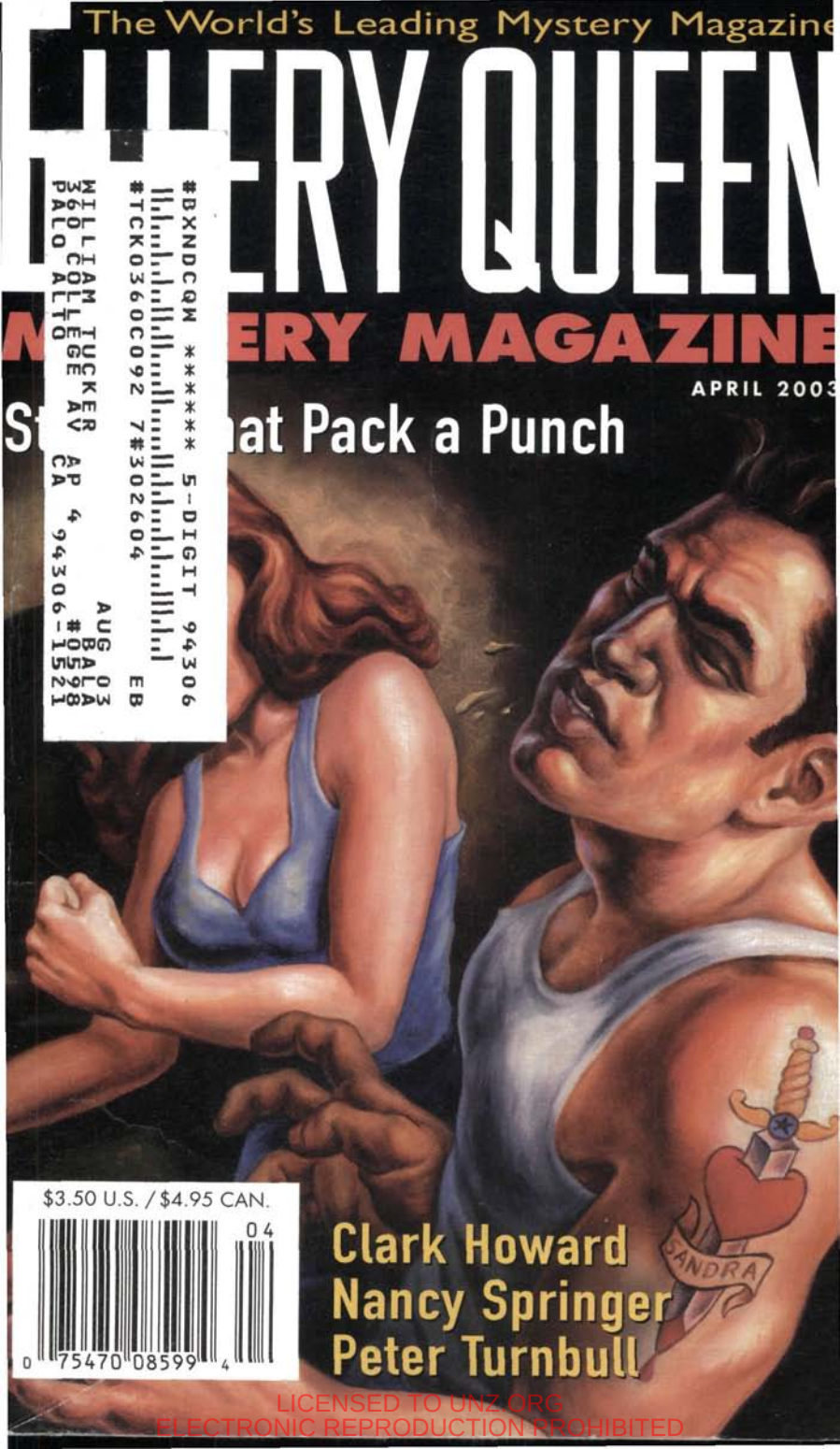

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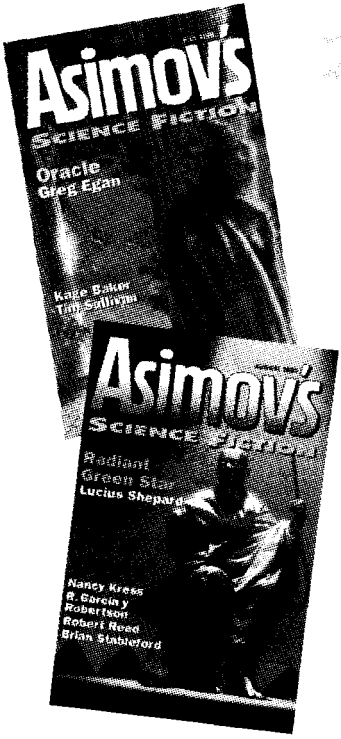

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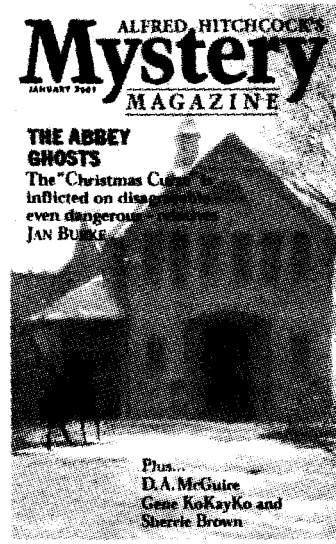

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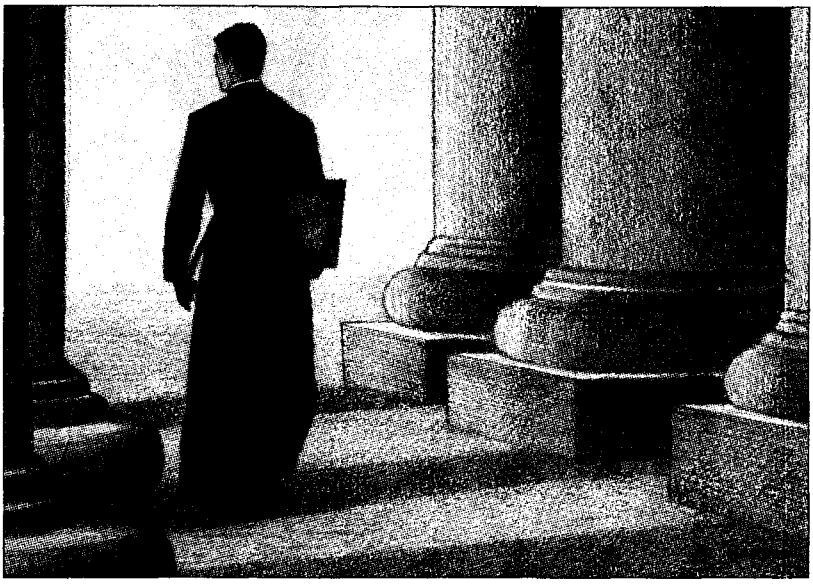

Art by Laurie Harden

The Mask of Peter

by Clark Howard

Antonio Leoni heard the tragic news that Thursday morning while sitting at his desk, in his office, leafing through the latest issue of *Art Collectors* magazine. The office, elegantly outfitted, was on the floor above his art gallery on Via di Fiori, just around the corner from Rome's famous Spanish Steps and the Piazza de Spana where they began. Above the front of his business was a simple but stylish sign which read: GALLERIA LEONI.

One inside wall of Leoni's office had been removed and replaced with a balcony and sitting area overlooking the gallery's main showroom. It was there that the prominent art dealer entertained prospective clients and, less frequently of late than he would have liked, consummated purchases. In more lucrative days, Leoni had earned billions of lire on that plushly trimmed little indoor balcony. At one time he had employed six multilingual, designer-clothed salespersons to handle general commercial and tourist trade, while he himself dealt only with high-plateau collectors. Now his wife Sante was his only assistant, and his business had survived for more than two years by way of bank loans on which

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he was able to make interest payments only.

Behind Leoni's desk, on the shelf of a splendid thirteenth-century console, he had a small radio which was permanently tuned to the broadcasting station of the Conservatorio di Musica, which sent forth no music written later than 1800. On that Thursday morning, Leoni's background music had barely made the cut, being Haydn's Opus 76 for string quartet, written in 1799. The movement had barely begun when it was interrupted by a news bulletin from the Vatican. The pope was dead. He had suffered a stroke while eating breakfast that morning.

A caper novella, but with a serious theme, this new Clark Howard story makes a departure from the author's usual fictional world of hardened criminals and society's dispossessed. Here is the privileged world of the Vatican, and its depiction is bolstered by the kind of meticulous research that once earned Mr. Howard awards as a writer of true crime. A five-time *EQMM* Readers Award winner, Mr. Howard is a topnotch storyteller. †

Antonio Leoni put aside the magazine and sat perfectly still for two minutes, his mind generating explosive bursts of thoughts that seemed to ricochet in his head like grenade frags. Presently, wetting his lips, he lifted the receiver of his telephone and dialed a number. It was answered after only one ring.

"Sì?"

"Bobbio? Have you heard?"

"Yes, just now. On the television."

Leoni waited a long moment, then blurted, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, the whole plan has to be put off, Bobbio! The pope has died, for God's sake!"

"Calm down before you have a stroke, Leoni. The pope's death is regrettable, but I don't think it will affect our plan. One thing has nothing to do with the other, don't you see?"

"I think you are mistaken," Leoni disagreed. "We cannot possibly go through with this plan under such circumstances. The pope is dead. All of Vatican City will be in a turmoil. The entire College of Cardinals will be meeting to elect a new pontiff. Security will be at its tightest—"

"All right, Leoni, all right, I see your point. But I still believe we can proceed as scheduled—"

"I want to meet with Trino," Leoni insisted. "I will not agree to going forward unless I can meet with Trino."

Leoni heard a great sigh from the other end of the line. "What-

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ever you say, Leoni. We all want you to be happy. I will contact Trino and get back to you. *Addio.*"

When Bobbio Belluno hung up the call from Antonio Leoni, he rolled over in bed and opened a nightstand drawer to get a package of cigarettes.

"I thought you quit smoking," said the woman in bed beside him. She was not a woman, actually: only twenty; no maturity, only body, only passion, only youth. Bobbio Belluno, at thirty-seven, was not certain, here in the morning light, what had attracted him to her in the first place. Six days ago. In a bar. Drinks. Perfume. Touches. Breath. The nighttime, with its promises.

"I did quit smoking," he replied, almost absently. "But I am starting again."

"Smoking will kill you," said the girl-woman.

Bobbio looked steadily at her. How could someone her age even speak of death? he wondered. He tried to recall whether he, at twenty, had ever spoken or, for that matter, even *thought* of death. He didn't think so. At twenty, he had been a promising young artist, doted on by older, wealthy women who thought, or pretended to think, that he was another Picasso, another Chagall, another—whoever. He lit and dragged deeply on the cigarette. What the hell difference did it make? He was thirty-seven now and had been going downhill since he was twenty-nine. He had not sold an original work of art in two years, and the future, if one could call it that, looked bleak, to say the least.

But, he reminded himself, there was still that one last chance, one last piece of driftwood that to cling to might prevent him from drowning in the sea of artistic obscurity. There was still that studio and art school for sale in Venezia. All he needed was the money to buy it.

Focus on the plan, he silently ordered himself. Put everything else aside. Tamping out the cigarette on the tile floor after only one drag, he got out of bed, turned off the television, and walked naked to the dresser where his wallet lay.

"I have a surprise for you," he said to the girl-woman, with as much joviality as he could marshal. "I am going to buy you a trip to visit your parents in Firenze. I know you miss them, you want to see them; you've spoken of it at least a dozen times since we met in the bar last week. Well, I want you to have your wish. Here—" he began counting out ten-thousand-lire notes, advance money he had been given by Trino when he became part of the plan. "How much will you need, do you think? A new dress, too, of course—"

"I don't understand," she said, bewildered, sitting up in bed, drawing the sheet up to cover her nakedness. "What about us?"

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"Us!" Bobbio exclaimed. *"Carina mia,* there will be plenty of time for us! When you return! Come now, get dressed. You have shopping to do, train reservations to make, little souvenirs to purchase for your parents and sisters. Come now, hurry—!"

He had her out of his place in eighteen minutes flat, and then turned again to the telephone. He direct-dialed the private telephone number of Alba Trino on the island of Sicily.

Alba Trino and his wife Margherita were enjoying their usual late-morning breakfast on the terrace of their home, which was perched high on a bluff overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea a mile outside of the town of Carini, west of Palermo. Rita, as Trino called his wife, was a full-bodied woman of fifty who might easily have looked matronly had it not been for her flair with flattering clothes and the way she carried herself: her long stride, the easy roll of her shoulders, the perfect tilt of her chin. Alba Trino had met her when she was a typist in one of the dozens of government offices in which he was required to register when, as Al Treen of Camden, New Jersey, U.S.A., he was deported to Italy after being convicted of nineteen felony counts in violation of the RICO statutes. It was a shocking blow to him—the deportation, not the convictions—for he had always considered himself a U.S. citizen; after all, he had a Social Security card, he voted, he paid his taxes (within reason), and he had two grown daughters attending Radcliffe. Those things aside, however, the fact was that his parents had brought him to America when he was two months old, a year after World War II concluded, and neither parent had ever applied for citizenship in their new country. When the Department of Justice realized that, Al Treen became not a convict but a deportee. Divorced by his American wife, who unequivocally refused to move to Italy, he had a decade-long playboy fling in Rome, then courted and married Margherita, after which he retired to a life of comfortable leisure in Sicily, financed by his three younger brothers—who as yet had not been convicted of anything in which they were involved, and who, in any case, had been born in America.

Alba and Margherita and her elderly mother resided in a remodeled old Moorish estate home which they had purchased primarily for its spectacular view of the Tyrrhenian. They were served by a devoted Italian couple in their forties who were childless and relished the idea of being cared for permanently by the Trinos.

Alba Trino savored his breakfast with Margherita each morning (except Sundays when they attended Mass and did not eat until lunch), and was pleased that his mother-in-law, a late riser, never joined them. They ate slowly, sipping American coffee while reading aloud to each other items of interest in his *New York Times*

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and her *Osservatore Romano.* The eggs on their plates came from their own hens, the sausages were Portuguese from a market in Palermo, the sliced tomatoes and pan-fried potatoes grown in their extensive garden, and the water, as pure as any on earth, was drawn icy cold from a deep well around which they had built a shrine to the Virgin Mary which was garnished daily with fresh flowers, also grown by them.

When the telephone rang that morning, Alba knew without looking at her that a frown of curiosity has settled on Rita's face. She had sensed for some time now that there was something going on in her husband's life to which she had not been made privy. Knowing him as she did, she had concluded that it was one of two things: another woman or an illegal scheme of some kind. She put only a little credence in the first; her own sexual demands on him, when tallied with his on her, did not seem to leave any surplus energy for a third party. She believed that Alba had been faithful to her since their first intimacy together. Still—men were men. . . . As for the second possibility, Rita dreaded even thinking about it—almost to the point of hoping the problem *was* another woman.

Alba stepped into their sitting room and answered the ring on a portable extension. "*Buon giorno*—"

"*Buon giorno,* Alba," said Bobbio. "Have you heard the news?"

"I'm just reading the papers—"

"It won't be in the papers yet. *Il papa* is dead."

Alba stepped back onto the terrace. "Turn on the TV, Rita. The pope has died." As Rita came in, Alba moved farther out, to the tiled balustrade of the terrace. "Go on," he said to Bobbio.

"Leoni called me. He's very—*nervoso.* He thinks we must call the whole thing off."

"Because the pope died?"

"*Si.*"

"*Sciocchezze!*"

"I know it's nonsense—"

"One has nothing to do with the other."

"Exactly what I told him."

"We are only four days away—"

"I know." Bobbio sighed heavily. "He insists he must meet with you before going forward."

"*Dannare.*" Damn.

"He mentioned something about security being tightened."

"Oh?" Alba paused, curbing his irritation. Security. He wondered if Leoni was referring to the Guardia Svizzera Pontificia, the hundred or so colorfully uniformed Swiss Guards who could be seen in and around Vatican City at all times of the day and night, protecting its many gates and interior from idle or serious trespassers. Or did Leoni know about the Servizio di Vigilanza? Not too many

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people were aware of the small, secret, elite force of highly trained, well-armed men in dark blue suits who seemed to appear out of nowhere if a visitor strayed off a predetermined path. This cadre of men had been formed after an attempt on the pope's life some years earlier.

Perhaps, Alba considered, Leoni's nervousness had enough merit to at least look into. If the pope's death resulted in shift changes, schedule modifications, or other temporary variations in routine, it might—just *might*—affect their plans. "All right," he told Bobbio, "I was coming to Roma the day after tomorrow anyway, so I'll come today instead."

"I'll drive out to Fiumicino to meet you. Which flight will you take?"

"I won't fly. I'll need my car while I'm there, so I'll take the ferry over to Napoli and drive up the coast. It's less than a hundred eighty kilometers; I can make that in three hours. I'll stop in Gaeta and bring you some ripe plums."

"Grazie, padrone!"

"I'll call you tonight from the apartment. Come over for a drink and we'll talk about this. *Addio."* He disconnected and turned to find Rita standing in the terrace doorway.

"Why must you go to Roma so suddenly?" she asked directly.

"Some minor business," he said absently, and walked past her. She followed him to their bedroom, as he knew she would.

"Alba, I want to know what is going on," she said with grim Calabrian determination. Women from the far south of Italy could be impossible at times.

"I told you, *carina,* it is some minor business only."

"Minor business. I see. So minor that you must drop everything and hurry to Roma. *Bugiardo."*

Alba gave her a pained look. "Rita, please do not call me a liar. It's not nice."

He got out a two-suiter and began to pack. Rita looked around for someplace to pout. She chose a large Spanish chaise longue on which they had made love that morning after showering and before breakfast. It had been one of those spontaneous, impulsive couplings as they happened to pass each other, naked, on their way to dress. Two, perhaps three minutes, with no conversation, no foreplay, only several shuddering climaxes, one his, the others hers.

Alba knew, of course, why she had chosen the chaise to sit and pout; it was her way of reminding him of what he was leaving behind, what might be at risk in whatever it was that he was involved in. When he finished packing, he went and sat beside her. *"Mi amore,"* he said, taking her hands, "trust me. This trip is merely something I must do for my brothers back home. It is

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strictly nice and legal, just tedious paperwork, really. But it will keep me busy for several days, I'm afraid." He kissed her on the cheek. "You know I have promised never to involve myself in anything criminal again."

"You also promised to be faithful to me," she reminded him. "In Roma are you going to be seeing that woman that you used to sleep with before me—that Sante, who is married to the art dealer?"

"No, of course not. Rita, please. My promises to you still hold."

"Promise me again."

Alba raised his right hand. "I swear to refrain from any illegal activity and never to touch another woman, not even any of the hot-blooded women who prowl the streets of Roma looking for a prize catch such as myself. There. Satisfied?"

She finally let him go with hugs, kisses, smiles, and blessings, and within an hour after the call from Bobbio, Alba Trino was in his Maserati speeding toward the Palermo ferry dock.

On the way he wondered why women always forced the men they loved to make promises they had to break.

Late that afternoon, deep in the complex body of the Government Palace in Vatican City, a telephone rang in an obscure, poorly lighted, sparsely furnished, barely known little office which had not even a number to identify it. A young black priest from Detroit, working at a decrepit desk, answered the ring. *"Curia* suboffice, Father Bennett speaking." After listening briefly, he said, "One moment, please," and turned to a fellow priest, about the same age, but white. "JoJo, it's for you. It's your Uncle Mafia."

"Very funny, Buckwheat," said the white priest, reaching over to take the phone. *"Buona sera, Zio,"* he greeted his uncle by title.

"Joey, how's my boy?" said Alba.

"Bene, grazie, e Lui?"

"I'm well, too. But I think we must have supper. Probably tomorrow night. To decide whether today's happenings will affect us."

"Okay. I thought you might call," admitted Father Joseph Trino.

"How is everything there?"

"Same as always for the slaves down here in the Dungeon. We didn't even know about it until after the world had heard the news. But I imagine things upstairs are pretty hectic."

"Naturally. Observe all that you can tomorrow. We'll discuss the whole matter when we meet for supper. Say about eight. The roof of the Hassler all right?"

"Sure. I like their Tortellini Bebe."

"Who doesn't? See you then. And, Joey—be careful."

"Sure. *Addio.*"

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After Father Trino hung up, Father Royal Bennett asked, "Everything cool, JoJo?"

Joseph Trino nodded solemnly. "Cool as vespers, my friend," he replied softly.

The next day, with Father Bennett and several other close associate priests covering his absence from what they all called the Dungeon, Father Joseph Trino spent hours wandering about the sovereign religious city-state whose principal overseer had just died. Joseph Trino was a second-generation Italian-American who had been raised on the Lower West Side of Chicago and educated in neighborhood parochial schools where he was an honor student; he had taken his honors forward to a scholarship at Loyola, then on to a Jesuit seminary. Ultimately, he had been selected to be a missionary in Central America, but now, because of what had been deemed a disrespect of church authority, he was laboring as a menial clerk with other misfits and malcontents who had committed similar acts.

Surprisingly little on the surface of the Vatican, Father Trino found, had changed on this first full day of the pope's demise, that day being logged from the first midnight after he stopped breathing. The throngs of tourists, who kept coming, were a little quieter, a little more orderly; there was a little less traffic through the vehicle gates, a little more through the pedestrian entries; for some reason there seemed to be more nuns at large on St. Peter's Piazza, and fewer priests—but not by much. No unusual activity was noticeable around the barracks of the Swiss Guard, or the Vatican post office, or the radio station, or the museum, or the library, the exhibition hall, the art gallery, or any other area where Father Trino walked carrying a briefcase and wearing the concentrated look of a young cleric on a mission.

He did notice additional bustle around the newspaper offices, where a black banner of mourning would border the pages of its publication every day until a new pontiff was elected; and around the printing office and mint, which for the same period of time would have the words *"Sedes Vacans"*—Latin for "The Chair Is Vacant"—put on every new stamp printed and every new coin minted. There was also a great deal of clamor at the Vatican Press Office, where representatives from worldwide news services began to arrive. But these were small pockets of flurry that did not affect the overall visage of the Holy City, nor disrupt its tempo.

It was only around the Palace of the Holy Office that the daily routine was suspended and a somber but highly regimented one put in its place. An official announcement of the death had now been written, approved by the senior cardinals, and notarized. Doctors who had attended the living pope had assigned his body,

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under their signatures, to embalmers for its preservation. The pontifical remains had then been laid on a simple table under a plain white sheet between two rows of white candles in the Sistine Chapel, under Michelangelo's ceiling frescoes "The Last Judgment." He was being watched over by members of the Swiss Guard, who stood so still their breath could hardly be detected.

Early the next morning, the second full day, the pope would be dressed in red as befitted the Bishop of Rome, which was also his office, and he would be placed in a cypress coffin and taken to the Chapel of the Most Holy Sacrament, where he would rest as tens of thousands of his mourners filed past for a final view of him. On that day, unlike the others, Vatican City would become a hive of humanity, because on that day the pope would belong first to the people, before the church. And as he lay there, the Cardinals of the Sacred College would be overseeing his ring being defaced, his personal seals being broken, and medals struck during his reign and coins minted under his personage being collected for burial with him.

Then, on the third full day following his death, he would be buried. . . .

In a back corner of the rooftop restaurant of the Hassler Hotel, perched high above the Spanish Steps, Father Joseph Trino cupped his hands around a glass of prime Tignanello wine and said thoughtfully, "It's ironic, isn't it, that the Holy Father will go to his tomb just the day before we plan to act."

"You see no reason, then, to postpone our plan?" asked his uncle, Alba Trino.

"None," said the nephew.

"Good," said Alba. He smiled faintly, relieved. "I'm not at all sure that we *could*. Everything has been in place for so long—nearly a year. Our principals have already arrived—from Argentina, Japan, Syria, Kuwait—"

"They're all here?"

"Yes. I had Leoni verify their arrivals today. Leoni was the reason I came in two days early. He was convinced that we should postpone everything."

"How did you handle him, Uncle?"

Alba shrugged. "I simply agreed with him."

"You *agreed* with him?"

"Yes. And then I began to go over with him exactly where life would take him from there. First there would be the disgrace of bankruptcy. Then the auctioning of his gallery and everything in it. The repossession of his home, his cars. I pointed out to his wife that her jewelry would be confiscated by the bankruptcy court—"

"So," Joseph smiled, "you saw Sante again. Shame, shame."

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Alba shrugged. "Please. I merely spoke with her."

"Ah, nevertheless, I know my lusty *zio,*" said Joseph. "For the thoughts I'm sure you had, say five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys and I won't tell Aunt Margherita."

"I accept the penance, Father," said Alba with mock seriousness. "Now, we were discussing Leoni—"

Joseph held up a hand. "I understand. You agreed with him until he finally agreed with you. Can we be certain he won't falter at the last moment?"

"I'm having Bobbio stay with him. Sante says he has been dreaming of owning a new silver Bentley; she will keep reminding him of that. He'll be fine." Alba took a sip from his glass. "But what about you, Joey?"

"What about me?"

"Will you be fine?"

"That's a curious question for you to ask, Uncle Al. This was all my idea, remember?"

"Maybe that's what troubles me, Joey," Alba told him quietly. "You are a priest. You've been a priest all your life. You were a priest when you were eight years old—you just hadn't taken any vows back then. Your whole family, all of our friends, all of your teachers—everyone—said you were born to be a priest. And now—I don't know, Joey—perhaps I'm having second thoughts about what I'm helping you do. . . ."

"I will keep my religious vows, Uncle," said the younger man, "in my own way. I will serve God in my own way. So will Roy Bennett and the other eleven priests who have joined me. None of us are doing this for ourselves."

"I know that. I keep reminding myself that is the only reason I'm helping you."

"That," said Joseph with a smile, "and the money, Uncle."

"Well, my compensation for the risk I take, of course—"

"Of course." Joseph patted the older man's hand across the table. "I love you, my uncle."

"I love you too, my nephew."

When Joseph returned to his quarters that night, Royal Bennett and the other priests were waiting for him. "How did it go?" he was asked immediately.

"Fine. Everything is on schedule."

Smiles lighted their gloomy little barracks room and stolen sacramental wine was poured all around. Joseph looked at them: as varied a bunch of renegades as one could ever imagine. Roy Bennett, from the Detroit ghetto; Alan MacFee, from the Welsh coal mines; Carlo Ola, from the slums of Rio; Lee Toowoomba, from the Aboriginal outback of Australia; Gordon Leith, son of a British

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member of Parliament, and Davy Shade, a poor kid from Bethnel Green; Najim Raipur, from the red-light district of Calcutta; Siwa Minya, from the poor outskirts of Cairo; twin brothers Jim and Kim Panay, from one of the decayed jungle villages on Luzon; Raul Goriano, from the ravaged rain forests of the Mato Grosso; and finally, Hector Cordoba, son of a renowned Spanish surgeon.

Like Father Joseph Trino, all of them had been ecclesiastic scholars, all selected by the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith to travel forth from Rome as apostolic visitors to far-off lands. Their charge had been to locate areas in which there had been significant remission of Roman Catholic faith and to submit proposals which, when implemented, would not only restore faith to the community but also create parochial primary schools, basic-care medical facilities, operable sanitation and sewage systems, and begin building a stable economic base. It was the belief of the Congregation leaders that the renewal of one such community, especially if it lay in the midst of a greater deprived area, would generate a spirit and enthusiasm that could spark surrounding communities to follow the same path of renewal.

Among the missionary priests appointed to do this work, there was a fervor, an impatience to move forward, a passion to succeed. They seethed with vigor and zeal. This, after all, was what their calling to the priesthood had been all about: to *serve* and in doing so to enrich, both in spirit and in life. When, singly and in pairs, they returned to the Vatican a year later, their detailed proposals were prepared and submitted, and they waited, eager to receive funding and orders to go back to their respective areas to begin the work they had designed.

But no such orders came.

Each of the young priests was, instead, assigned an auxiliary job: bishop's assistant; archbishop's aide and runner; daily Mass server for the more than three thousand people who came to work daily at Vatican City, as well as the thousand or so who actually resided within its walls; escort for prominent visitors, and such. During the time they waited, some of them were requisitioned to assist in the ceremonies to create two new cardinals of the Church, an elaborate liturgical function held at St. Peter's Basilica and costing tens of thousands of dollars. It was during this period that on a gradual basis the young missionary priests were exposed to the lifestyle of the "red hats," as they were referred to by lesser members of the cloth; a lifestyle outside the Vatican in which the princes of the pope's senate resided in opulent manors and were waited upon like royalty—as they were considered to be.

It was the growing knowledge of the expense involved in such extravagance that ultimately caused Father Joseph Trino, and the other missionary priests as well, to be accused of clerical disre-

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spect, for when each and every one of their proposals was rejected, ostensibly due to lack of funds, and when the entire missionary renewal project was tabled for an indefinite period, Father Trino and the others all filed strongly worded appeals to the Holy Father himself—without going through proper channels, without following proper procedures, and without seeking permission from the pope's closest counselors to do so. Rumors of the minor revolt reached outside news sources, which resulted in brief but profuse publicity that the College of Cardinals considered scandalous. Thus did thirteen young priests, all of them Jesuits, find themselves relegated to barely tolerable subterranean offices doing the most menial paperwork at hand.

It was a short time later that Father Joseph Trino began thinking about "The Mask of Peter."

There had begun, some five decades earlier, an excavation beneath St. Peter's Basilica in an effort to find the tomb and possible remains of St. Peter himself, who had been designated by the living Christ as the apostle to whom the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven passed, thus creating in him the first pope of the church. Peter reigned for twenty-five years as the head of the Christian church before the Roman emperor Nero ordered his crucifixion. At the time of his execution, Peter was sixty-seven years old. Because of that, and the fact that he had always been thought a large, powerful man, heavily muscled from hauling in fishermen's nets, subsequent artwork had portrayed him with great arms and shoulders, with thick, flowing white hair and beard, and the fiery eyes of an evangelist. After many years of excavation under the basilica, however, it eventually became clear to the modern Church that this was not the case. The conclusion came about as a result of archaeologists unearthing in the vast tomb-filled grotto they found beneath the basilica four pieces of artwork, together, which, when studied as a group, portrayed an entirely different Peter.

The first piece of art was a sketch made on parchment with some kind of primitive ocher-colored, perdurable ink, which showed the face of a man who had been crucified upside down. At the bottom of the sketch was written, in Italian, "Kepha 67."

The next item was a copy of the original, on thinner, better-made parchment, in charcoal but colored in with hued paste of some kind to make it more lifelike. On the reverse side, in Latin, was written, "John IV, endorse."

The third piece was an unfinished painting of the first two images combined, done on canvas, with the head now shown in bust fashion, turned upright, and taken out of the context of a crucifixion. It showed the death face of man with an almost cherubic countenance, an expression not of outrage at his execution or even

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fear of the certainty of death, but rather a strange peace, a tranquility. The head was covered with a crop of tight grey curls, thinning in front, and he wore no facial whiskers, neither beard nor moustache nor mutton-chop sideburns. On the upper right corner of the reverse side was written, "Com. Pont. Max." The inscription was not in Italian but Portuguese.

The last, most recent, and most identifiable item was a small painting, twelve inches square, done on fine-quality canvas with full oils, combining elements of its three predecessors in an image of a death mask. This artwork was cited on its back, "Antoine Chevrey, for Clement VI, Pont. Max. 1351."

After their discovery in the excavated basilica grottoes more than six hundred years after the creation of the last piece of artwork, church scholars determined their probable history. The sketch in ocher perdurable ink had been made by an unknown Roman artist in the year 67 A.D., as he viewed the dead Peter, also called Kepha, crucified upside down near the obelisk of Nero on the Via Cornelia. That sketch was discovered in the year 641 A.D. by pope John IV, a Dalmatian, descended from people who migrated from the Adriatic regions first to Palestine, then to Rome. Because Peter had also been a Palestinian, John IV, possibly intrigued by a mystic connection between himself and Peter, probably commissioned another artist, also unknown, to reproduce the sketch in charcoal and colored paste. The third piece, on early canvas, with the face uprighted, although undated and attributed to no one by name, clearly had been commissioned by the papacy since the term "Com. Pont. Max.," meaning "Commissioned by the Pontifex Maximus," was sealed on its reverse side. The piece was easily attributable since Portuguese was the language used in the seal and only one pope, John XXI, had been Portuguese. The date had to be sometime in 1276, because early in 1277, John XXI was killed, after a reign of only eight months, when a Vatican ceiling inexplicably fell on his head.

The final piece, identified by its own seal, was the death mask painted by the great French artist Antoine Chevrey at the behest of pope Clement VI, fifth in a line of eight French popes who reigned over the Church for seventy-three years, not in Rome but in Avignon. Clement, once the deacon of the Sorbonne and close in both spirit and geography to the Louvre, had been, at fifty-one, a relatively young and active pontiff, and had systematically selected and had transferred to his homeland many of the Vatican's art treasures. His interest in producing an authentic painting of Peter's death mask was characteristic, and he passed his nationalistic greed on to Innocent VI, Urban V, and Gregory XI, all Frenchmen who succeeded him. It was not until Urban VI, an Italian, was elected in 1378 that all of the Church's transferred riches

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were returned to Rome. From that time on, the College of Cardinals made certain that only residents of Italy were elected to the throne of Peter.

The Mask of Peter had been stored in the grotto beneath the basilica where Peter was believed to be buried, and that grotto was eventually sealed shut for six centuries. When the painting was discovered during the excavations begun by pope Pius XII, it was moved to an area in the Vatican Apostolic Library called the Museo Sacre, or Sacred Museum, a repository for early Christian and Byzantine art. There it had hung ever since. Small in size, only twelve by twelve inches, its appraised value, made in the year 2000 A. D., was four hundred million dollars.

On the day of the pope's burial, his body was clothed in full regalia and pontificals, a gold miter placed on his head and a gold lappet across his chest, and his face was covered with a purple veil. A red ermine blanket was laid over him, and the cypress coffin was sealed. That coffin was placed in a lead coffin, on which his coat of arms and certificate of death had been inscribed. The cypress and lead coffins were then placed in an ordinary elm coffin, of the type used to bury the poor. Nine Masses were said for him, and then he was lowered into a burial vault beneath the high altar of the basilica. A mason bricked the vault closed, and a marble tablet with the pope's name, title, and dates of birth and death was affixed to the sealed crypt.

On the day of the burial, Vatican City was closed to the public and to outside employees, but on the following day it reopened to its normal routine and was once again teeming with activity. Early in the afternoon of that day, Father Gordon Leith, son of a British member of Parliament, now one of the Jesuits involved with Father Joseph Trino, appeared in the *permesso* department of the Holy Office with a forged request on stationery stolen from the desk of the assistant to the Father General of the Society of Jesuits. The monsignor to whom Father Leith handed the request looked up at him in annoyance.

"You want passes for twelve Jesuits to visit the Vatican library?"

"That is correct, Monsignor. They are brothers visiting from various nations."

The monsignor frowned. "I know nothing of twelve visiting Jesuits quartered here."

"They are not quartered at the Vatican, Monsignor. They are staying at our society's headquarters at Number Five Borgo Santo Spiritu."

"I see. Well, on the day after we buried our pontiff," the monsignor sniffed, "I should think their time would be better spent in

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the Sistine Chapel, in prayer, rather than prowling about the library."

"They are all students in the field of bibliography, Monsignor," Father Leith explained politely. "The Father General thought that even a brief exposure to the Vatican library would be a significant experience. But if you feel that it is an inconvenience—"

"No, no, I didn't mean to intimate that," the monsignor ceded. He was probably remembering, Leith thought, that the assistant to the Father General of the Jesuits was a bishop, while the boss himself was a cardinal. "I suppose it's all right."

"Shall I give you a list of names to put on the passes?" Leith asked blithely.

"Heavens, no, I haven't the time for all that," the monsignor said, beginning to count out and officially stamp a dozen cardboard passes bearing the Holy Office imprimatur. "Just fill in the names yourself before you return them to be voided."

"Yes, Monsignor. I'll see to it myself."

"And here's a guide pass for whoever accompanies them."

"That will be me, Monsignor. Thank you for your help."

At four that afternoon, with Father Leith as their escort, Fathers Joseph Trino, Royal Bennett, and the ten others involved in the conspiracy arrived at the Vatican library and were admitted by a Swiss Guard officer. The officer gave them a stern reminder that the premises would close for the day promptly at a quarter past five, and that no photographs were permitted. Thanking him, Father Leith led his black-frocked group into the great building that was the repository of half a million volumes, seven thousand of which were cradle-pressed by hand, and one of which was a Gutenberg bible printed on parchment. Also on display, in locked showcases in the Sacred Museum section, was a rich collection of classical antiquities and jewelry of ivory, enamel, gold, and silver, as well as walls of invaluable smaller works of art—including "The Mask of Peter."

Four Swiss Guards routinely patrolled the halls, anterooms, and vestibules in what seemed like a random pattern but in fact was a series of precisely plaited routes that criss-crossed at exact points and gave them a ninety-percent-plus surveillance of the entire interior property. There was absolutely no way a single, pair, trio, or quartet of thieves could possibly make off with anything. But the process of guarding the priceless contents of the premises was not refined to the point where it could protect the library against *thirteen* culprits at once. Particularly if they were priests bearing papal-office passes.

Once inside, the group remained loosely together as they explored the many displays. Soon, however, they began to separate

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into smaller cliques of twos, threes, or fours. When three of them reached the entry door to the Sacred Museum room, they nodded and smiled at the Swiss Guard on duty at the door. That guard remained at his post, but within thirty seconds another guard had followed them in and begun patrolling the room. Presently, three more of Father Joseph Trino's priests entered the room, and moments later two of the first three left. Another two entered; three more left; one of the first three then returned. Three of the remaining five entered; some more left; the last two entered; they came and they went. . . .

Each of the priests had a notebook or sketch pad of some kind; they made notes, drew rough drawings, made boxes out of their thumbs and index fingers to estimate distances. None of them, the guard patrolling the room would remember later, showed particular interest in "The Mask of Peter." None of them, the guard at the door of the Sacred Museum would say, appeared to be carrying anything other than the notebook or sketch pad he'd taken in—however, in fairness, it had to be taken into consideration that all of the thirteen had been wearing cassocks, except for their guide from Jesuit headquarters, who had been dressed in black coat and trousers. Anything of reasonably small size could easily be concealed under a cassock.

The guard inside the room swore that when he left, all the visiting priests were gone, and that nothing was missing from the room. The door guard swore that nothing had been carried out that had not been brought in. And the guard at the main entrance, who had put an exit stamp on their passes, had noticed nothing out of the ordinary among the courteous, chatting visitors.

Nonetheless, at six the following morning, library janitors, in the process of cleaning, urgently summoned Vatican security, nervously led them into the Museo Sacre, and pointed to a narrow column wall.

"The Mask of Peter" was gone.

That evening, on the terrace of Antonio Leoni's palatial home high in the hills above the Eternal City, four men of distinctly different backgrounds were entertained with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres prepared by Sante Leoni's own kitchen staff, which had been personally selected by her ten years earlier when she married the prominent art dealer. Sante had been thirty-five at that time, and five years earlier had seen her lover of the previous decade, Alba Trino, end their longtime affair by marrying some government office clerk he had met by chance. Sante, a chic, cosmopolitan woman born and raised in Rome, once a successful model, later a booking agent for the same modeling firm which had once represented her, had been stunned by the turn of events which ended

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the affair. After all, she and Alba, the infamous but infinitely charming and handsome American gangster deportee, had for years been one of Rome's golden couples, invited everywhere, welcome everywhere, photographed by paparazzi at every turn. And then to lose him to a *clerk*—granted, a clerk with some looks, some flair, some *something,* she was still a nobody. Until that dog Alba took her and her peasant mother to Sicily and made country ladies of them.

For a time, Sante publicly hated Alba, all the while continuing in private to love him. But as time passed, she went on with her life, had other far less satisfying affairs, and eventually met Antonio Leoni. A widower eighteen years her senior whose several grown children were far-flung and not bothersome, Leoni was first enchanted, then captivated by Sante, and within months they were wed. Leoni had never mentioned Alba Trino to Sante, nor she to him. It was a shock to both of them, years later, after hard times had come upon them, when Alba came into the Galleria Leoni with a proposition that promised a deliverance from their financial troubles.

On the Leoni terrace this evening, Alba was co-host to the four men who had come from distant places to be there. At one point, Alba stood at the side of the terrace with Sante and observed them interacting over cocktails with Leoni. Each of the men had a personal bodyguard standing nearby, and two of them had multilingual translators a step behind their shoulder.

"An interesting quartet, eh?" Alba said to Sante.

She raised her eyebrows. "I wonder how much collective wealth they represent?"

"Hundreds of billions, perhaps trillions, I imagine."

"I can't fathom such figures," Sante said, adding lightly, "though I'd like to try."

Alba smiled at her. "I'm very pleased that you still have your wonderful sense of humor, Sante."

She shrugged. "Why not? Your leaving didn't completely destroy me. Tell me, how is life with your little clerk lately? Does she type your correspondence for you?"

"Don't be unkind, Sante. Being unkind doesn't become you. It detracts from your beauty."

"Am I still beautiful, Alba?"

"As beautiful as ever. You will always be. Now you must excuse me. I should be with Antonio."

Alba moved casually into the group of men. As he sipped his drink and listened to their conversation, he studied them. Each was indelibly interesting in his own way.

Victor Blanca, tall, suave, debonair, was the scion of an old-line Argentine-German family that made millions in armaments dur-

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ing World War Two and subsequently filtered those profits into South African diamond mines and made billions. He owned one of the finest art collections in the Western hemisphere.

Kiru Sakata, smooth, polished, quiet in the Japanese way, owned the largest fishing fleet in the world. Residing on a vast estate near Nagoya, he had the most extensive collection of Western art ever held by an Asian.

Bey Hama, a Syrian, was large, bulky, with piercing eyes and perfect teeth. The wealthiest import-export entrepreneur in the world, his sixty-room mansion in Damascus contained only religious works of art: paintings, statuary, carvings—from all faiths on the globe.

And Sheik Karbala, of Kuwait, bearded, robed, bejeweled, one of the ten richest recipients of oil royalties in the world. Living like an emperor of old in a magnificent palace on the Persian Gulf, he was engaged in a perpetual battle with a neighboring sheik, his cousin, over which of them could collect the most valuable *objets d'art* for their respective properties.

What the four of them had in common, on the surface, was that they were all zealous collectors of the finest art. The other characteristic they shared was that none of them would balk at buying stolen property. They would have traded their wives and children for the "Mona Lisa," even though it would have to have been hung in a dark, locked, guarded room and shown only to the most trusted friends. It was just the possession that mattered to them: the *ownership.* They were like men who would rather have others think they had slept with a beautiful woman than to have actually done it and have no one know it.

At one point in the gathering, Alba Trino excused himself and was on his way to another room when he passed an open door beyond which Sante Leoni was talking on the telephone. He could not help pausing when he heard her say, "No, I won't be able to get away for several hours. After his guests have left. Then I must wait until he has gone to sleep. But by midnight, I'm sure. Yes."

A pang of pity coursed through Alba. Poor Sante. How he wished she could be as happy with Antonio as he was with Rita. But—it was not his problem. He proceeded on to the room that was his destination, unlocked it with a key that Leoni had given him, and switched on the lights. They were gallery lights, positioned to accentuate the center of one wall where, on a simple, unadorned easel, rested "The Mask of Peter." Arranged before it were four comfortable club chairs.

Alba Trino took a deep breath and raised his chin an inch. His shoulders reflexively straightened and his jaw clenched. Pride shrouded him, for he had been a thief all his life, and this—this was the greatest theft of all.

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After draping a length of velvet over the easel, Alba stepped to an adjoining room, opened the door, and said, *"Avanti."*

Two lean young men in dark suits, wearing dark glasses, each with an AK-47 slung on one shoulder, came out of the room and followed Alba to where "The Mask of Peter" rested under its velvet cover.

"One on each side," Alba instructed. "Weapons pointed down. Speak or move only on my command."

Returning to the terrace, Alba announced, "Gentlemen, if you are ready, please follow me."

Glasses were set down, translators consulted, private instructions given to bodyguards, and then the four men and their collective entourage were escorted by Alba and Leoni into the gallery room.

"Make yourselves comfortable, please." Alba gestured toward the chairs. Leoni stood next to a small table nearby, on which was a file folder. Alba took up a position between the two armed men, ordering, "Stand outside and close the door." Then he addressed the four guests.

"Gentlemen, as you know, you have been invited here to be given the opportunity to make confidential bids on an extremely rare artwork; in fact, an artwork which was never meant to be sold. Whoever purchases it will be buying a piece of history that dates back to the year sixty-seven A.D. Its appraised value, if it were ever to be put on the market, would be four hundred million U.S. dollars—but it would never be put on the market, so in that respect it is priceless.

"Sealed bids will be accepted from each of you. The piece will go to the highest bidder of over four hundred million U.S. dollars, with no further negotiation. The buyer's identity will be kept confidential; the three losing bidders will simply be advised that their bids did not prevail. You will each be asked to secure from your country's bank in Roma an amount equal to the amount of your bid in twenty-five-thousand-dollar bearer bonds. The successful bidder will pay for his purchase with those bonds. We regret putting the unsuccessful bidders to this inconvenience, but in a moment you will understand the urgency of our situation. I must also tell you that because of the nature of your purchase, the winning bidder will find it necessary to make arrangements through his country's embassy to have the purchase transferred back to his home country as part of a diplomatic shipment. All of you are influential enough to do this; otherwise, you would not have been selected by Signore Leoni to participate in this transaction.

"Now." Alba stepped to the table and from the file folder removed several sheets of paper which he distributed to the four men. "These are international wire service bulletins in your

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respective languages which have gone out this very evening. Tomorrow this story will be on the front page of every major newspaper in Europe, and probably the world. . . ."

The lead on the electronically produced bulletins read: PRICELESS PAINTING MISSING FROM VATICAN. The story followed: In the wake of the pope's funeral yesterday, Vatican officials have reported that a painting of St. Peter's death mask, rendered in 1351 from a sketch purportedly made at St. Peter's crucifixion in 67 A.D., is missing from the Sacred Museum in the Vatican Apostolic Library. Italian national police are sealing off the entire city of Rome in an attempt to prevent the priceless artwork from being transported. . . . More to follow.

"Gentlemen," Alba Trino said, removing the velvet cloth, "I present to you 'The Mask of Peter.' "

The faces of the four men glowed with mixed expressions—hunger, lust, excitement, arousal, *need.* These were men of extraordinary resources, accustomed to having everything they desired without question or hesitation; to see something so highly coveted that they might *not* obtain stirred in them unusual, unfamiliar feelings. Rising almost as one, they moved forward to study the great work. They knew of it, of course, knew its history, its verified pedigree. They might even have seen it during their world travels to study the great artworks of mankind. But to stand before it now, in this manner, with a one-in-four chance of owning it, made the moment, the experience, almost surreal.

"You will find pens, paper, and envelopes on the table, gentlemen," Alba said. "Whenever you are ready, please write your bid amount, sign it, and seal it in an envelope. You will each be notified sometime after twelve noon tomorrow, which gives you the morning to obtain bearer bonds in the amount of your bid. The high bidder will then bring the bonds here and receive his purchase. I leave it to you."

Kiru Sakata, the Japanese, was the first to act. In a brisk, unhesitating move he wrote down a figure, signed and sealed it, and, with cursory courtesy, departed. Bey Hama, the Syrian, and Sheik Karbala, of Kuwait, wrote their bids simultaneously, turning their backs on one another in obvious distrust. Then they, too, departed. The Argentinean, Victor Blanca, waited until the others had gone, then smiled broadly and said, "Gentlemen, suppose I were to sign a blank slip of paper and allow you to enter my bid—say, ten percent above the highest of the other three?"

Alba smiled back. "Señor Blanca, we appreciate your spirit as well as your generosity—but no. Let us keep this transaction as honest as it can be under the circumstances. But I wish you luck."

With a gesture of resignation, Blanca completed his bid and left.

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By noon the next day, Italian National Police, senior investigators from the Constabulary of Rome, and Vatican security officers had rounded up twelve of the thirteen Jesuit priests who were the last visitors to the Museo Sacre the previous day. It had been determined that they used a forged request to obtain passes and had used fictitious names on those passes. All of them, it turned out, were on restricted assignments of one kind or another while awaiting disposition of complaints against them for various forms of behavior which were considered by higher authority to be disrespectful, defiant, difficult, or in other ways wilfully wayward.

The twelve being questioned denied any knowledge of the missing artwork and insisted that they only conspired to get out of their tedious duties for a few hours, and that the whole episode, as far as they were concerned, amounted to little more than a prank—one more item to add to the grievances already attributed to them. The authorities took a much dimmer view of matters, however, and all twelve were placed under quarters restriction by the Swiss Guard.

Each of the twelve denied any knowledge of the whereabouts of the thirteenth member of their group. Father Joseph Trino could not be found.

It was Sheik Karbala of Kuwait who received a call from Antonio Leoni at a quarter past noon. Leoni called from the study of his palatial home. Only he, his wife Sante, Alba, and Bobbio were there; all the servants had been given the day off. When Karbala came on the line, Leoni said, "My congratulations, sir. Your bid of five hundred and one million was the prevailing figure. Please come to my home at once to complete the transaction."

Karbala was there within thirty minutes. Seven briefcases of bearer bonds were checked and verified as authentic by Alba Trino, and Karbala was escorted to the same room he had been in the previous night and allowed to take his prized purchase, which he and his aides carefully packed in a suitcase.

As soon as they drove away, Bobbio Belluno brought in another copy of "The Mask of Peter" and put it on the easel while Leoni telephoned Kiru Sakata. "Congratulations, sir. Your bid of four hundred eighty-five million was the prevailing figure. Please come to my home at once to complete the transaction."

Sakata arrived promptly, Alba accepted his bearer bonds, and he and his escort left with the second forgery.

"This is amazing," Leoni said. "Neither of them even inspected it closely."

"Why should they?" Alba asked. "After all, we are all honest crooks here, them as well as us. Leoni, try not to sweat so much."

Victor Blanca received the third call. "Your bid of four hundred fifty-six million was the prevailing figure—"

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And then Bey Hama. "Your bid of four hundred fifty million was the prevailing figure—"

By four o'clock that afternoon, Alba was dividing up one billion, eight hundred and ninety-two million dollars in bearer bonds.

"Bobbio, my friend, you get eighteen million, nine hundred twenty-five thousand. Consider the extra five thousand a bonus for the eight months it took you to complete and artificially age the forgeries."

Bobbio stuffed his loot into an artist's duffel and bade them farewell. As Leoni was walking him out, Alba telephoned his nephew, who was staying in an apartment that his uncle kept on a quiet side street just off the Via Veneto. It was a secret place that even Margherita did not know of. In a corner building owned by an older couple who occupied the ground floor, it had two entrances—one common entry in the front and another more private one on the side. The older couple were well paid to have no curiosity about who came or went or when, and never inquired about anything.

"Come on over, Joey," Alba said when his nephew answered the call. "We're splitting the take. Bobbio just left with his share."

When Leoni returned to his study, Alba counted out another one percent plus bonus for him, and another for himself. "Here you are, Antonio, my friend: eighteen million, nine twenty-five for you, eighteen million, nine twenty-five for me. That leaves one billion, eight hundred thirty-five million, two hundred twenty-five thousand for Joey and his twelve partners. And that," said Alba, standing up, "concludes our business, I think. Shall we have a drink to celebrate?"

"All of our business is not complete," Leoni said, opening a desk drawer and taking out a Beretta automatic pistol. "We still have some personal business to take care of. About you and Sante."

Alba froze. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Sante went out last night after she thought I was asleep. I was waiting up when she came back in at three in the morning. She confessed that she had been with you."

"Antonio, that is a lie!" Alba swore.

"Is it?" Leoni said, grunting softly. "She has never stopped loving you, Trino. She told me so herself, last night. I tried to give her some degree of respectability as my wife, but she could only think about the old days with her famous American gangster boyfriend. You two have been seeing each other all along, haven't you?"

"No, Antonio, that's not true, I swear! I give you my word—"

"Your *word,*" Leoni said scornfully. "What good is the word of a thug, a mobster, a man so low he was thrown out of his own country? You are scum, Trino. There is nothing you would not steal—a work of art from a holy place, this money from men who trust you, another man's wife!"

"Me? What about yourself? You are a part of this, too!"

"Yes, but I have a reason—survival. You take simply to take. The

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world will be better off when you are gone, you bastard! But first I want you to admit that you were with Sante last night!"

"I won't admit it! It's not true!"

Leoni went one step closer and fired. The slug hit Alba almost exactly in the center of the chest and he pitched backwards onto the floor and lay still. The echo of the shot was quickly gone, replaced by Sante's frantic voice as she rushed into the room.

"Tonio, what have you done!"

"You were with him last night, weren't you?" Leoni said quietly, turning to her, the gun at his side.

Sante stopped abruptly, frowning. "With him? With Alba?"

"You might as well admit it. He confessed to it before I shot him."

"Tonio, no, it is not true—"

"It *is* true. You went out. You went to him. I know you did, Sante."

"I went out, yes—"

Leoni raised the pistol and aimed to shoot Sante in the same place he shot Alba. But his hand was unsteady now and the bullet passed through her abdominus muscle, nicked the liver, and lodged in her rhomboid muscle. She fell, dying from the liver nick. Leoni knelt beside her.

"Confess to me, Sante," he whispered. "Confess before you die. You went to Trino, didn't you?"

Her eyes grew wide with the fright of death; she clutched her stomach where very dark blood, almost black, seeped between her fingers. When she spoke, it was in broken, forced gasps. "—went out—bring home—new Bentley—for you—surprise—"

Leoni rushed through the house and into the attached garage, and found there a gleaming new silver Bentley sedan in place of one of the older, troublesome Mercedes with which they had been making do.

"My God—"

He hurried back to Sante's side but found that her wide eyes stared only at darkness now. A terrible anguish coursed through him, a misery so intense that he had only one way to suppress it, by putting the pistol to his own head for a final shot.

Arriving by taxi, dressed in jeans and a windbreaker, carrying two large empty pieces of soft-sided luggage, Joseph Trino entered the house and found the three dead people. He dropped to his knees, stunned. Crawling over to Alba, he took his uncle's face in both hands and began to cry.

"Zio, Zio, my God, my God—" He sat back on his heels, rocking his body back and forth, weeping aloud, a dreadful dolor coming over him. "God, Lord Jesus, what have I done!" He straightened to his knees. "Almighty Christ, help me! Punish me for this terrible sin! It was not meant to be like this, Lord—this was not part of it—

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we only wanted the money for the people we promised to return and help—we wanted to do Your work, Lord, the work we were meant to do—but our plan was never *this*—never to have lives taken—punish me for this, Lord—condemn me to the darkness—"

Joseph did not know how long he knelt there rocking his body in suffering and sorrow, praying and pleading for divine castigation. But eventually he cried himself dry and realized that the remainder of the afternoon had passed and the room was darkening. His mind groped through the misery of the moment and regrouped to a more reasonable reflection. What had happened? Had one of the purchasers discovered his forgery and returned, or sent men to exact retribution? No, that made no sense; Leoni's desk was covered with stacks of bearer bonds, which were equal to currency and unchallengeable anywhere; why would they be left behind? Bobbio—where was he? Had he done it? No; again, the loot was still there—and Alba had told Joseph on the phone that Bobbio had left with his share.

Joseph examined the scene more closely. Alba, Antonio, Sante—and only one weapon. One had killed two and then committed suicide. Had Sante killed her husband and former lover—for what reason? Obviously not to run off with all the bonds. Turning on a lamp, Joseph knelt and looked more closely at the bodies. Alba had been shot in the chest, Sante in the torso—but one side of Leoni's face was partly gone. Leoni had died last, by his own hand, after killing Alba and Sante.

Joseph stood, his shoulders squaring, jaw clenching. This, he decided, had nothing to do with the theft of the painting, or the sale of the forgeries. It was a tragedy—but entirely removed from what he and the twelve other priests planned to do. So their path must not turn, nor their goal change.

Joseph unzipped the two soft-sided bags and laid them open on the floor. The bonds on Leoni's desk were eight by ten inches in size, flat and unfolded. They looked to be in stacks of about one thousand. There were seventy-four stacks. Joseph packed fifty of them neatly in one bag and zipped it closed. A dozen of the other stacks he put in the second bag. Then he began to search the main-floor rooms. It took him less then three minutes to find "The Mask of Peter." With several towels from a guest bathroom, he carefully wrapped the priceless painting, put it in the second bag, and packed the last dozen stacks of bonds over it for protection. In Alba's trousers pocket he found the keys to the Maserati. The bags were so heavy that he had to carry them out separately, using both hands; one fit in the boot, the other in the small rear seat.

By the time he drove down into Rome, night had fallen. No one saw him carry the two bags into Alba's apartment through the private side entrance. He put them in the back of Alba's closet.

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Then he spent an hour praying for the repose of the soul of his dead *zio*.

Two days later, a small padded envelope arrived in the Vatican mail. It contained the key to a public locker in the Roma Termini, the city's central railway station. Four officers of the Vatican Vigilanza accompanied a bomb squad and observed as they evacuated the terminal, opened the locker, and found "The Mask of Peter" wrapped in a towel.

That same day, the media reported three bodies discovered the previous morning when servants arrived for work at the home of prominent art dealer Antonio Leoni. The bodies of Leoni, his wife, and her ex-lover were immediately concluded to be victims of a love triangle murder-suicide.

With the stolen painting returned, Roman city police and Italian national troops disbanded the roadblocks and checkpoints that had been set up to prevent the painting from leaving the city. With departing vehicles no longer being searched, Bobbio Belluno rented a small van, loaded up all his art supplies and bearer bonds, and drove at once to Venice. He did not know or want to know what had happened at Leoni's after he left, so made no attempt to contact Joseph at Alba's apartment. When he arrived in Venice, he deposited ten of the bonds in a branch of the Swedish State Bank, saying that he had recently inherited them from a deceased uncle's estate. He then began looking for an upscale, canal-side apartment. No further thought was given to buying the art school and studio. Why bother? A man of his means did not need the worry. He already had other things on his mind. One of the clerks at the bank was very soft and pretty and young.

Father Roy Bennett and the other eleven priests suspected in the theft were kept under strict Vatican confinement and relieved of all duties, including serving Mass. Within days, they all proclaimed a wish to renounce their vows and leave the priesthood. After their disavowal, each was given a plane ticket back to their place of ordination. Shortly after their arrival, each received via Fed Ex International a shipping box containing thousands of bearer bonds with a value of 144 million U.S. dollars. Within a week, each had put his share in a trust account, obtained a new passport, and departed for the community that the church had originally planned for him to renew. No longer able to pass as Catholic priests, they now called themselves "pastors," and the religious sodality they represented was called The Brotherhood of Peter. Each began his separate work.

On the island of Sicily, a heartbroken Margherita Trino received a telephone call the day after Alba's funeral from a weeping Joseph, who swore to her that Alba's death had not been the love triangle reported in the media. "I cannot tell you more than that,

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Aunt Rita," he said, "but I want you to know that Alba gave his life to help tens of thousands of poor deprived people all over the world. Someday there will be a monument to him somewhere, and you will know it. I swear that to you. *Addio.*"

The next day, Rita received a box of two hundred bearer bonds—five million dollars.

Alba Trino's daughters and brothers in the U.S. each received identical letters from Joseph, telling them the same thing: There would be a monument to Alba, and they would know about it.

Joseph left Alba's apartment wearing some of Alba's clothes, with a suitcase full of them as well, and with the remaining bearer bonds in a second suitcase. In the Maserati, he drove north out of Rome, along the coast to Livorno, then on to Genoa, where he spent the night. The following day, with a U.S. passport Alba had obtained for him through his connections in the Rome underworld, he crossed into France and drove to Nice, where he deposited one-third of the bearer bonds in a Canadian bank. He left the Maserati in a long-term parking garage at the Nice International Airport and flew, by way of London, to Caracas. In the Venezuelan capital, he deposited another one-third of the bonds in a Cayman Islands bank.

Finally, Joseph traveled the last leg of his journey, by plane, to San Salvador, the capital city of El Salvador, where he established a bank account in the name of The Brotherhood of Peter for the purpose of building a church and other projects in the village of Zalico, three thousand feet up in the San Marcelino mountain range. He also made arrangements for a prepaid truckload of food-stuffs and other essentials to be delivered there once a week.

As he traveled up-mountain in a newly purchased Range Rover, its cargo space filled with clothing of every size for both genders, Joseph thought of the work that lay ahead: establishing the health clinic; constructing the sanitary system; starting the primary school; providing subsidies for the farmers to begin producing coffee beans and cotton; setting up a modern food cooperative so that no man, woman, or child would go hungry.

And, of course, starting the new church. The Church of the Brotherhood of Peter. And this village, Zalico, would be just the first. Its success would spill over to others, all the way down the mountain.

As he climbed higher and higher in the mountains, Joseph knew there would be no one to meet and greet him when he arrived. So much time had passed; he was sure none of them expected him to return after so long. They had probably decided by now that he was just another missionary, full of religious words and empty promises.

But they would be surprised this time. It would be different this time.

Because this time, St. Peter was calling the shots. ●

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Adios, Amigo!

by Terry Lerdall Fitterer

Betty and George had a misunderstanding
Concerning vacation: To Paris or Spain?
George boldly stated, "You're much too demanding!"
Betty, persistent, yelled, "Don't pass the blame!"

George argued Spain, as it reeked of El Toro,
Bullfights and matadors clouded his sight;
Betty, convinced that this vision: El Bore-o,
Held her defense through the shank of the night.

Hubby grew stubborn, unruly, and cranky;
Wouldn't give in till his ego was fed.
Betty, exhausted, waved high a white hanky,
Cried, "I surrender!" then flew off to bed.

As she lay restless and most irritated,
Betty remembered *till death do us part;*
Could George's idea be too underrated?
Spain, plus a bull, equals—gored in the heart!

Early next morning as Betty served waffle,
Looking at hubby she offered a deal:
"Thinking again, Spain may not be so awful—
Paris can wait, dear, now finish your meal."

Once they were settled in quaint hacienda,
To the arena George wanted to head,
And Betty, with murder high on the agenda,
Tossed out a shirt for old George—colored red.

Crowds in the stands were applauding and cheering,
"Death to the bull and its ominous wrath!"
George never noticed the animal leering
As he was pushed in its treacherous path.

Betty, relieved that her plan went according,
Proud it went off without nary a hitch,
Yelled from a plane bound for Paris, then boarding,
"Hasta la vista, you son of a *****!!"

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BEST EATEN COLD

by Laura Wilson

When Laura Wilson's first novel, *A Little Death,* was published in Britain, the *London Times* said: "Superb...this is an exciting debut." The book went on to receive a nomination for the Crime Writers Association's Ellis Peters Historical Dagger. Ms. Wilson has since written two more suspense novels. *A Little Death* and her second book, *Dying Voices,* are available in the U.S. (Bantam). What a pleasure to have her in *EQMM!*

Soon as Mrs. Fleming said the name, I thought, *that's him,* Professor Stephen Reed: the man who killed my husband. And then I thought, this is *meant.* Because I believe in justice, and if I get caught—well, I'll tell you now, there's not a court in the land would convict me, not if they knew what I've been through. You might say it's for God to decide, but I say you make your own justice. In any case, if you're a believer, then it's God that's given me the opportunity, isn't it? And I'm taking it. Now.

Professor Reed's daughter's a friend of a friend, of course. They always are—that's how she gets the business. Fleming's Fine Dining: Complete Catering Service for Private Parties and Functions. Dinner parties, all catered, served up, cleared away—all they have to do is enjoy theirselves. Mrs. Fleming does all the cooking—I'm just here to dish up and wash up.

I used to like cooking. Never do it now—no point in going to all that trouble just for yourself. I used to do a nice roast, with all the trimmings—Reg used to love that, right up till the end when he couldn't keep a thing down. . . . When he'd finished he'd sit back in his chair with a big smile and say, "Lovely dinner, Mrs. Skinner." And I'd come round the table to clear his plate and I'd give him a kiss—just a little one—on the cheek. Seventeen years he's been dead, and I still miss it. Silly, really, but that's what life's all about, isn't it, the small things? And I'd have my Reg with me now if it wasn't for *Professor* Reed. That's why I'm saying, *it's meant.*

They're all in there, tucking into their dinner. Golden Wedding Anniversary. We'd have been coming up for ours in a couple of years if Reg was still alive. . . . He's got his children in there with him.

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Grandchildren, as well. We never had children—that can't have been on my side because I'm one of six and all my brothers and sisters have families. That was due to Reg's illness, I'm sure of it.

Professor Reed's got silver hair now. Looks good for his age, though. All plump and pink, not like poor Reg with his face as grey as stone and so thin you'd think a puff of wind would knock him over, and he was only forty-eight when he died.

Soon be time for the sweet. Good job it's one of those where they get individual bowls. . . . Zabag-lyon alley Fragg-ola,* it says on the menu card. Strawberries with fancy custard on top. It was a special request and Mrs. Fleming had to do it all on the spot, so that's made her even more narky than usual. She's just nipped out to the van for something—left it all laid out on the side, so . . . here we go. Just put them on the tray, and then . . . it's a round one so I've put a little bit of the custardy stuff on the edge to mark the place. I found the bottle in my cupboard at home. Carbon tetra . . . something-or-other. Dry-cleaning fluid. Poison, it says on the label. Do not ingest.

'Course, it won't look too good for Mrs. Fleming when her posh friends get wind of how Professor Reed ate one of her dinners and turned his toes up. They won't be so keen to come to her for their little do's after that, will they? It's a shame, though, because one thing I will say for her—she's always paid cash in hand, no questions asked, and I can do with the money because I never got a penny after Reg died. They've been saying on the radio there's investigations now into cases like his, saying there might be money for the families—compensation—but if you ask me, it's a waste of time. Professor Reed and his sort, they won't admit they did wrong. People like us don't count, not in their eyes. Half a dozen times I've been in and out of that dining room and he's never once looked at me, never mind recognised me.

There's not been a day since Reg died when I haven't thought of it, it's interfered with my sleep, and there have been times—I don't mind telling you—like after Reg's funeral . . . ten of us at the crem, that was, and sandwiches, when it's nearly sent me off my head. I found out where Professor Reed lived, you see, and I used to go round there—I just wanted to talk to him, really, give him a piece of my mind—night after night, I'd go, but he never opened the door. He got the police onto me, warning me off. They told me I needed help. I said, you'd need help if somebody murdered your husband, but nobody listened.

'Course, he's moved since then. Gone up in the world. Great big house, full of things, nice area. . . . No expense spared, you can see that.

We'd been courting a few months when Reg got the call-up, but I knew already he was the one for me. We knew it was coming—

* Zabaglione alle Fragole

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National Service, report to such-and-such a place—and none of the boys wanted to do it, but you didn't have a choice. So there he was, doing the training, and he's seen this notice on the board saying they wanted soldiers to help with research about the common cold. Years later, he said to me, "I was a mug, Eileen. I broke the first rule of the army: Never volunteer." He thought it would be a cushy number—decent food, extra pay—so why not? 'Course, now they're saying it never had anything to do with the common cold, but Reg told me he remembered the words as clear as if it was yesterday, and he wasn't a liar.

Professor Reed was the one in charge. They sent them into this chamber with a glass wall so the scientists could watch, and this fan starts going. Reg and the others thought it was germs they were blowing at them because there was nothing to see, and no smell, but he said after a few minutes his nose started to run and his eyes felt funny and he thought, that's a bit quick . . . then he noticed this rabbit they had with them, in a cage, it was twitching and jumping about all over the place, and he knew something was up.

He said he couldn't see properly, after—they had to lead him back to his billet, and it was like that for three days, with terrible headaches and feeling sick and all the rest of it, and then he heard afterwards that it was a nerve gas, but they had to keep it secret and not tell anybody, even a doctor.

We got married as soon as he was demobbed, but he always had a lot of illness, which he never had before, and I got more and more worried . . . but it was quite a few years before he even told me what had gone on, and how he thought the health problems must have been brought on by these experiments.

He got a job working for the gas board, reading the meters, but after about five years he started getting dizziness, and not able to breathe properly, and then after that he started feeling sick, and it got so bad he kept having to sit down. Years when it was going on I'd say to him, he'd got to see the doctor and get some treatment, but he said no, because it was a secret—he thought he'd get in trouble if he told anyone. He had to give up work in the end, and by the time he *did* see the doctor, it was too late. Cancer.

So, as I say, I'll miss my extra money, but you've got to take the rough with the smooth, haven't you? Because since Reg died, it's stuck in my mind all the time how it wasn't right. What I'm doing won't bring him back, but it'll make it more *fair.* An eye for an eye, that's what they say, isn't it? And peace of mind—that's worth more than a few quid in your purse.

Well, now . . . that looks very nice. Just pop the little bottle back in my apron pocket, wash my hands, and it's done. Better get on and polish the coffee spoons. Here she is, back in again—always in a rush.

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"I've got your little bowls all ready, Mrs. Fleming."

"They're *ramekins,* Eileen, not bowls. And they're not ready, they've got to go back in the oven." And then I see she's got the sifter in her hand and she starts spraying icing sugar like there's no tomorrow, and I'm trying to keep a lookout for my little mark in case it gets covered up, but she's spinning the tray round and before I know it, it's gone and I've got no idea which is which . . .

She's talking to me, but it takes a minute before I realise she's saying go and clear the plates, and I'm thinking, if I can just keep an eye on the tray, I'll be able to work it out, so in and out I go, fast as I can, but she's got the cooker door open and she's taking the bowls off the tray two by two and shoving them in, and now I can't tell which is Professor Reed's anymore and my mind's spinning round and round like the tray, What do I do, what do I do . . .

Last plates now, and I'm hurrying as fast as I can, trying to remember if all the bowls looked alike, but she's opening the cooker and bringing them out and they're all glazed on top with the icing sugar and no way to tell. . . . I'm leaning over her, standing too close, and she brushes me out of the way—"Fetch me that tea-towel," and she's mopping the tray with it. My little mark is gone and I'm watching these bowls, all the same, it could be any one of them, and before I can pick the tray up she says, "Oh, for heaven's sake," and snatches it up and marches through the door into the dining room, so I go after her and she's putting them down, one for each place, and they pick up their spoons and start to eat and I can see all these mouths opening, red inside, with tongues and white teeth and the shining silver spoons going up and down, up and down, and I'm looking, trying to work it out, who it is . . . Professor Reed or his wife or their sons or their wives or their daughter or her husband or the children, which it'll be, because I don't know how long it takes or what it does and I'm staring at this row of mouths and chins and napkins coming up and glasses of wine catching the light—and I don't know which one will get it or what's going to happen and then suddenly I see myself as if it's somebody else and I start to laugh because this is *my* experiment and it's like Professor Reed and those others when they exposed Reg and his pals to the nerve gas, waiting to see what'll happen, and it's a trick like theirs because they think I'm just a waitress and it's just a dinner, and they've got no idea . . .

And then they stop talking and their heads come up and they look at me because I'm laughing. And I look straight at Professor Reed and he looks back and our eyes meet for the first time and he knows and he knows I know and I laugh and laugh and I can't stop, I'll never stop because it's justice and it's perfect and I watch him push back his chair and I know I've done it. Seventeen years, it's been, since Reg died, but I've finally done it. ●

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ROGUE'S RUN

by Donald Olson

On writing of that great conflict, scholars have devoted scant, if any, attention to the Battle of Rogue's Run. Perhaps because among Civil War clashes it was not really a battle at all but little more than a minor skirmish, hardly worth a mention. Nor does the locale, fairly inaccessible, encourage many visitors. The turbulent stream from which the battle takes its name plunges through a shallow ravine known as the Vale of Discord, and all that identifies the battlefield as such is a single cannon rusting among thickets of dwarf pine and mountain laurel, and a small collection of gravestones. Conspicuous among them stands a granite mausoleum, like a miniature Greek temple cloaked in ivy, its heavy bronze doors, green with verdigris, having been opened only once in the past fifty years . . .

The term "cozy" always comes to mind in regard to Donald Olson, and yet there is occasionally something a tad more sinister in his stories than one associates with the mysteries of Agatha Christie and others of Mystery's Golden Age. Perhaps it is just that his villains do not always quite get their just desserts. Mr. Olson is a long-time contributor to *EQMM*. He lives in upstate New York and devotes himself to writing short stories.

The nearest town is also called Rogue's Run, as is its only motel, the Rogue's Run Inn. The name appealed to Zoe Coulter's ironic sense of humor, as she was quick to demonstrate.

"How singularly appropriate, Mother. Where is the rogue, by the way?"

"Now, please, darling, don't start. Lucky's taken the car to the garage for a minor repair. He'll be back soon."

"Not too soon, I hope. We have to talk."

Some people, if the light was not too bright, might have mistaken them for sisters so far as age goes. Hilda Wingate, in her late fifties, was diet-fad slim. Her artificially blond hair as well as

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her mode of dress were styled with an eye to fostering the illusion that she was ten years younger than her age. Her face, of course, required more effort, an effort that failed in moments of stress, such as now.

Her daughter Zoe disdained all such artifice. Dull brown hair hung like a sheepdog's over a square brow, beneath which somewhat froglike eyes now regarded her mother with undisguised contempt. A biggish woman, she wore long skirts to conceal shapeless bare legs. That she had driven virtually nonstop from Georgia might have accounted for a more than usual disarray.

Looking petulant, and in a defensive tone, Hilda said, "Your phone calls and letters have made it abundantly clear what you think of Lucky. Good grief, you don't even know him."

"How did you expect me to feel after you dropped your little bombshell? Saying you plan to marry the man. You must be mad."

"Maybe I am, if being in love is madness."

"In love!" Zoe spat out the word. "You're infatuated. With a fortune hunter almost half your age."

"He's not a fortune hunter. So what if he is a bit younger? Is that so uncommon? Honestly, darling, if I'd known you would come charging up here to lecture me I'd never have given you our itinerary." Hilda fussed with her pearls, looking pettishly aggrieved.

"You've known the man less than a year. Now you talk of marrying him—and changing your will!"

Hilda leaped on this. "Oh, I *see*. That's why you're in such a stew. I should have kept my mouth shut about *that*. Lucky's changing his will, too."

"Leaving you what?"

"A few years of happiness, I hope and trust."

"What absolute garbage!"

"Darling girl, I'm not disinheriting you. I'm trying to be fair. After all, you have Norman."

"Norman thinks as I do, that you've taken leave of your senses."

"I don't believe Norman said any such thing," retorted Hilda.

"You don't know Norman as well as you think you do."

"Please, precious, let's not quarrel. And you must promise to be civil to Lucky. I want you to like each other."

"Fat chance," sneered Zoe. "You mustn't even *think* of marrying that man."

Hilda said she had no intention of changing her mind. Zoe said, "I won't let you do it, Mother."

"You can't stop me."

"You might be surprised what I can do."

Hilda tried to change the subject. Had Zoe taken a room at the motel? "Yes." How long did she intend to stay? "That depends." Zoe

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cast a meaningful glance at the double bed. "What about him? Does he have a room? Or are you *sharing?*"

"Don't be insolent, darling. Of course we're not sharing. We're not yet married." She suggested that Zoe go to her room, take a shower, and change. "I must say you've let yourself go. You should have more pride. If not for your sake then for Norman's."

"Norman's made no complaint."

"Well, if you don't want to lose him you'd better take yourself in hand. Be more like Mommy."

This, Zoe's expression implied, was unworthy of comment. Instead, with an abrupt softening of manner, she reached for her mother's hand. "Mother, dear, I've no wish to irritate you. I'm concerned about you. I don't want to lose you."

"You needn't be afraid of that, Zoe. I'll always be here for you."

"Will you, Mother?"

The motel had no dining room but there was a lunchroom within easy walking distance. Zoe had retreated to her own room before Lucky returned to the motel, had told Hilda she would meet them at the lunchroom. In the meantime she soaked in the tub, combed her hair, applied a few traces of makeup, and then lay on the bed smoking a cigarette and pondering her immediate future. Important decisions had to be made, but she was in no condition to make them. And this insane idea of Mother's. The thought of her actually marrying that man produced in Zoe a feeling of impending loss. She could not let it happen.

A walk in the clear autumn air calmed her fraught nerves. She would make an effort not to embarrass her mother. If she was to accomplish anything, she knew she must behave herself, adopt a wait-and-see attitude, plan her strategy.

In appearance, Lyle "Lucky" Forrester came close to Zoe's preconceived image. She found him raffishly attractive—tall, wide-shouldered, with longish wheat-colored hair, what Zoe thought of as a cavalryman's moustache, regular features, and a pleasing baritone voice. Oh yes, she could understand how her mother could be smitten with him, blind to the fact that, as Zoe well knew, it was all a facade.

For a moment Zoe was afraid he was going to embrace her, but all he did was shake her hand.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Zoe. Hilda's told me so much about you."

"Really? I can't imagine there'd be that much to tell."

"Mostly about when you were growing up."

"Yes, well, I've done that if little else."

Hilda had clearly dreaded what she feared might be an awk-

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ward situation. She snatched up the menu. "Are you hungry, Zoe? You must be, driving all that way practically nonstop. It was very naughty of Norman to let you do it."

"It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Norman knew nothing about it. I left him a note."

"Well, when he calls give him my love."

"I doubt he'll call. He was off on one of his recruiting trips for the company."

The waitress came to take their orders. As they waited for their food Hilda began to relax. Had she really expected me to make a scene, Zoe wondered.

"Tell me all about this tour you're making, Lucky," she said sweetly. "Are you really as keen as Mother said about all this Civil War stuff?"

Lucky replied with what appeared to be genuine enthusiasm that even as a kid he'd been a Civil War buff. His great-great-grandfather had been a major in the Union Army, had enjoyed a distinguished career before being killed at Rogue's Run.

Hilda, gushing with pleasure at how well things were going, broke in to say how much she was enjoying their tour. They'd visited a number of battlefields: Antietam, Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville.

"I didn't like Gettysburg. All those monuments spread over such a wide area. Impressive but exhausting."

"You won't say that about Rogue's Run, sweetheart," said Lucky. The word grated on Zoe's ear. It sounded ludicrously inappropriate. "We'll be visiting the battlefield tomorrow, Zoe. You'll come with us, of course."

"Why not?" said Zoe.

Hilda beamed. "It's not just a pleasure trip, you know. It's all for the book Lucky plans to write."

"Oh, you're a writer?" Zoe asked. "What have you written?" Hard to picture him engaged in any kind of intellectual pursuit.

Lucky responded with a dismissive shrug. "Well, not much of anything yet."

"He's been looking for a proper subject," said Hilda. "Something that really excites him. I'm the one who suggested he do something with a Civil War background."

"Another *Gone With the Wind?*" The satirical undertone did not escape Lucky's notice. He was more perceptive than Zoe had suspected. She must be more cautious.

"I couldn't write fiction," he said lightly.

"So what have you done for a living?"

"Oh, this and that."

"Lucky has a great many latent talents," said Hilda, again on the defensive.

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Yes, I'm sure, thought Zoe. One of them being a gift for ingratiating himself with gullible, affluent widows. She knew she'd been right about Lucky. He was no better than a gigolo. Poor Mother. Someone had to shield her from his blandishments, one way or another.

Hilda laid a ring-laden hand on Lucky's golden-haired wrist. "You must show Zoe how splendid you look in your uniform, darling."

Lucky modestly lowered his eyes. Hilda explained. "Lucky belongs to a group who meet once a year to reenact Civil War battles. They're holding an encampment only fifty miles from here this year."

"Playing soldiers," said Zoe. "How quaint."

They finished eating in a somewhat awkward silence. Zoe stifled a yawn. "I think I'd better get caught up on my sleep."

Hilda said that was a good idea. "You must be fresh for our outing tomorrow. Perhaps we could have a picnic on the battlefield."

In her room, Zoe locked the door and shut the blinds against the blaze of the afternoon sun. She removed her dress and lay down on the bed. She had much to think about. How truly disgusting to think of her mother supporting Lucky Forrester, for it was obvious that's what she was doing.

All that bogus claptrap about his researching a book. Who did they think they were fooling? Mother was too starry-eyed to listen to reason. Once they were married Lucky would have no trouble manipulating her, taking over her life, getting his hands on her money and property. While she, Zoe, would be out in the cold, her mother beyond reach just when she would be needing her the most. It was cruelly unfair.

She got up and fetched her shoulder bag, took from it the gun Norman had taught her how to use to protect herself when he was away on the road. She hated guns but had to admit she felt safer when alone in the house. Terrible things were happening all the time.

It was a perfect day for a picnic, on a battlefield or anywhere else. As it was Sunday, the garage was closed. The repair to Hilda's car had to wait until the next day. This presented a problem which they discussed on the way to the battlefield in Zoe's car.

"But what about tomorrow?" Lucky wanted to know. "We'd have to leave pretty early to reach the encampment before noon." Hilda and Lucky had planned to go to the encampment and leave for home from there afterward.

Hilda came up with a possible solution to this problem. Why

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couldn't Zoe drive Lucky to the encampment and then return to the motel? "Soon as the car is ready I could join him there."

Zoe was at first inclined to reject the idea, but then realized it might be to her advantage to agree. The matter was settled. That's what they would do.

Entry into the Vale of Discord, that lengthy shallow ravine in which the Battle of Rogue's Run had been fought, was by way of a network of dirt roads winding through wooded hills.

"No, indeed," remarked Hilda upon their arrival, "it's certainly not Gettysburg."

Aside from the single cannon upturned among brambles and tall grass there was little to be seen except the neglected burial ground and the granite mausoleum in which, as Lucky explained, his ancestor had been interred. He said there had been money in the family at that time and the slain major's wife had wanted a suitably impressive resting place for her husband. Hilda found it charmingly picturesque. She'd brought her camera and insisted on taking Lucky and Zoe's picture standing side by side in front of the vine-draped structure. And one of Lucky alone standing on the step in front of the bronze double doors.

Lucky said he'd been just a kid the one time he'd been there with his father. "I remember teasing him to show me the inside." Which couldn't be seen through two little windows of stained glass, mere slots in the walls.

Zoe strolled around the outside. Rhododendrons, some of them brushing the roof, shaded three sides of the structure. "I suppose there's no way to get in," she said to Lucky.

Hilda laughed. "You always did have a morbid curiosity, darling."

"No problem," said Lucky, "if the lock's not too rusty and the key's still where my father hid it."

Two weathered bronze urns resting upon granite bases flanked the doors. Lucky lifted one aside and retrieved from the hollow center of the base an iron key nearly as long as his palm. He inserted it in the lock and with very little forcing it turned. With the women behind him he turned the wreath-shaped handle of one door. It swung open with a grating of hinges.

The air inside was musty. The withered brown remains of a floral wreath lay upon a marble slab bearing the long-dead major's name, dates of birth and death, and regimental statistics.

The chilly dead air of the tomb made Hilda shiver. She was not inclined to linger. The others followed her out, none of them speaking as Lucky relocked the door and returned the key to its hiding place.

"There," he said. "Now it can stay sealed up forever."

They chose a grassy knoll upon which to enjoy their wine and

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cheese, grapes and French bread. Hilda and Lucky chatted while Zoe, lighting a cigarette, gazed thoughtfully down upon the major's last, lonesome resting place.

The following morning Lucky checked with the garage and learned that Hilda's car would not be ready until noon at the earliest. A new alternator had to be installed. By nine o'clock Zoe was behind the wheel of her own car, her shoulder bag on the seat beside her. She watched with a tight sardonic smile as Hilda and Lucky stood outside the motel clinging to each other and kissing goodbye with the ardor of teenagers. She had to admit that Lucky did look quite dashing in his Union Army uniform.

Some hours later Zoe was again turning off the dusty dirt road into a weed-choked lane wending its way through the ravine to where it ended a few yards below the mausoleum. She stepped from the car and stood listening for several minutes. Only the whisper of a breeze in the encircling pines and the occasional chorus of birdsong broke the eerie silence of the forsaken battlefield.

She climbed the gentle slope to the tomb and paused once more to look and listen before lifting off the bronze urn and removing the key. She unlocked the door and left it open before returning to the car. She unlocked the trunk and with no more than a mild frown of distaste leaned forward to grasp the corpse in its blanket shroud and heave it out of the trunk.

Without undue effort but with a rush of adrenaline adding strength to her arms, she dragged the body up to the steps of the mausoleum and through the door, expelling her breath as she released her burden onto the floor atop the marble slab.

She relocked the door and, still holding the key, retraced her steps to the car. She lit a cigarette, drew the smoke greedily into her lungs. It produced an effect of dizzying exhilaration. A smile of deep satisfaction played upon her lips as she looked up at that impregnable fortress of a tomb.

With an airy gesture she brushed her fingers across her lips and parodied a farewell kiss.

"Goodbye, Norman," she said.

All the way back to the motel Zoe kept marveling at how fortunate she'd been to dispose of Norman's body beyond discovery. As well as the key, which she'd flung deep into the brambles where it could rust along with the overturned cannon. She had intended to rid herself of Norman's body during the trip north, in a swamp or patch of woodland, but never found just the right spot, knowing that almost invariably, no matter how well hidden, murder victims are sooner or later discovered.

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"I told you how mistaken you were about Lucky," said Hilda, primping in front of the mirror.

"Was I, Mother?"

"Well, you certainly gave that impression. You behaved beautifully. I was so proud of you."

"Time will tell if I was mistaken or not. For now I'll give him the benefit of the doubt."

"You will be coming up for our wedding, of course."

Zoe met her mother's eyes in the mirror. "I may be there before that, Mother. I think you'd better sit down. There's something I must tell you."

Hilda replied absently, her thoughts fifty miles away. "And what is that, darling?"

"Norman has left me. Taken off. He wants a divorce."

Hilda spun around. "You can't mean that."

"We had a frightful row. The row to end all rows." Which indeed it had been, literally. "He said terrible things to me. Unforgivable things."

"Norman? Poppycock. You must have provoked him. You know you can be very provoking at times."

"You don't know him, Mother. He's been cheating on me for months. With more than one woman. He mistreated me. Abused me. I can show you the bruises."

Hilda sat on the bed, shaking her head in disbelief. "If it's true what you're saying, what do you plan to do?"

"Well, I have to go back, of course. But not to stay. I thought I could come live with you."

"My dear girl, you know that's not possible. I'll be getting married. Surely you wouldn't want to live with Lucky and me. Be sensible."

Zoe's composure remained serenely unperturbed. "Mother, don't get yourself in a flap. It was only a suggestion. At least you can have no objection to my coming home for a while. Until I know what I'm going to do. Surely you can put up with me for a month or two."

"Ah, well, a month or two . . ."

Zoe went to bed that night well pleased with herself.

The problem of what to do about Lucky demanded no immediate solution. It would require meticulous planning. No desperate spur-of-the-moment decision as had been the case with Norman. ●

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The St. Valentine's Day Massacre

by Edward Marston

Sunday, February 14th

They were halfway to Tunbridge Wells when Alan Pomeroy broke the news to her.

"Oh, by the way," he said casually, "Mary is coming today."

"Mary Millfield?" she gasped.

"I'm afraid so."

"Why on earth didn't you tell me?"

"I just did, Enid."

"You should have warned me in advance."

"That would have been fatal," said Alan with a quiet smile. "You'd have cried off immediately. And I wanted you to be there. You enjoy our lunches so much."

She snorted. "There's not much chance of that today!"

"Enid!"

"Mary Millfield will ruin everything."

"Not necessarily. She's mellowed with age."

"Don't fool yourself," said Enid through gritted teeth. "Women like that never mellow. They simply acquire a coat of moss to hide their granite exteriors. Mary will never change. Anyway," she added scornfully, "why is Mary Millfield bothering to consort with lesser mortals like us? I would have thought she'd be up on Mount Olympus, preening herself in a full-length mirror or receiving her latest undeserved award for services to mystery writing."

Edward Marston is the pen name of an author who has previously appeared in *EQMM* under his real name, Keith Miles. Mr. Miles's writing career is extremely diverse: He is the author of literally hundreds of plays for radio, TV, and stage; he has produced contemporary sporting mystery novels, and he has created five separate historical mystery series under the pseudonym Edward Marston. Who better to write a story about a gathering of writers? †

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"Let's not be catty," he advised.

"She will *patronise* us."

"Not if we jolly her out of it."

"Alan, it's St.Valentine's Day."

"Then we must show a little love to a fellow creative artist."

"I'm beginning to wish that I'd stayed at home."

"Well, I'm not," he said, shooting her an affectionate glance. "These occasional lunches are the only chance I get to see you these days. A hundred Mary Millfields won't deprive me of the pleasure of driving you to The White Horse." He gave a chuckle. "With my heart condition and your stomach ulcers, the only other place we're likely to meet is in a hospital ward."

"Heaven forbid!"

Enid Smale blenched. Poor health was conspiring with the march of time to limit her social life. Bad eyesight had forced her to sell the car and to rely on the kindness of people like Alan Pomeroy, a fellow author who had become a good friend and, in the nicest possible way, a tame suitor. The unsigned Valentine card that had been slipped under the door the previous night had almost certainly come from him. Now in his early seventies, Alan was hardly a threat to her long-preserved virginity but he could still give her the odd conversational *frisson.* He was a true gentleman.

In her estimation, an Alan Pomeroy detective story was ten times better than one written by the egregious Mary Millfield. Alan had wit, style, and originality. Yet it was Mary who was the worldwide bestseller while he—and Enid Smale, for that matter—toiled relentlessly on for modest rewards. What puzzled her was why her companion was driving her to the lunch with controlled enthusiasm when he had particular cause to hate Mary Millfield.

"Her review of your last novel was sadistic," she recalled.

"At least I *was* reviewed," he said with a sigh of resignation. "You know what they say. Better to be looked over than to be overlooked."

"You weren't looked over, Alan. That harpy slaughtered you."

"She's entitled to her opinion."

"It was a wonderful book."

"Thank you."

"And Mary Millfield knew it. That's why she attacked you. Sour grapes."

"I don't hold it against her."

"Well, I would. She's *evil.*"

Until that day, Enid had always looked forward to the meetings of the Southeast Authors and Artists Association, held at a delightful pub in Tunbridge Wells and enabling the assembled scribes and painters to eat, drink, be merry, trade gossip, compare

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their agents, and generally have a good time. The presence of Mary Millfield would change all that. She would be the specter at the feast. Enid brooded in silence.

The White Horse was an Edwardian construction halfway down a country lane on the outskirts of the town. Built on several levels, it had a precarious car park that narrowed sharply towards its end and obliged one row of vehicles to park within inches of a small precipice. Alan Pomeroy showed no fear as he slid his ten-year-old Ford Fiesta between a Volvo and a gleaming Jaguar. He and Enid got out and went up the steps together. When they entered the building, they found that most of the others had already arrived. Drinks were ordered and the convivial atmosphere helped Enid to relax. There was no sign of Mary Millfield, the most famous member of the association. Hopes were raised.

"Maybe the old witch is not coming," said Douglas Harlow mischievously. "Or maybe her broomstick overshot the runway at Gatwick."

"Douglas!" hooted Clare Thomason, the resident giggler.

"Then again," speculated Harlow, "she may still be trapped in a list of bestsellers somewhere. Did you see the *Sunday Times* today? Mary has got two books in the top ten. Hardbacks. Just like her. Though she's hard at the front as well as the back."

Clare was seized by another fit of giggling.

"Now, don't be unkind, Doug," said Alan Pomeroy, the convener of the group. "We should be honored that Mary has seen fit to join us. She's a busy woman."

"Yes," retorted Harlow, "she's got all that money to count."

"Good for her!" said Barry Weller defensively. "I take my hat off to her. Whatever you may think of her books, Mary is an undoubted star."

"She's also a paid-up member of the association," Alan reminded them, "and thus perfectly entitled to join our meetings. Are you listening, Doug?"

Harlow nodded. "I'll give the old bat a welcome," he said, taking out his cigarette lighter and flicking the flame into life. "You look cold, Mary dear. Come and sit on this while I drive a stake through your heart."

Douglas Harlow was the self-appointed clown of the outfit, a small, owlish man in his forties with an impish sense of humor that found full expression in a series of comic novels about a Welsh policeman called Dai the Death. In spite of his exotically ugly appearance, he was something of a Lothario, and the giggling Clare Thomason was rumored to be his latest conquest. Why else did a young woman whose insipid watercolors hardly ever sell still come so regularly to the meetings and always contrive to sit next

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to Harlow? Barry Weller, a retired army man, was a jovial character in his fifties, the author of seven historical mysteries set in the Napoleonic War. He was the group's wine expert.

Enid Smale liked them all, even loud, laughing, paint-spattered Claude Cockspur, the hirsute artist, forever locked in his Picasso Period, and the weird Stephen Rudry, a pale, lonely, badly dressed, introverted young man whose book on Kentish murders revealed a worrying penchant for gruesome detail. Claude was a genial extrovert but Stephen was a watcher, a silent observer, a creature of sly smirks and glinting eyes. Enid could not recall his ever managing a complete sentence. Stephen was the newcomer to the group. His presence was another reason why she hoped that Mary Millfield would not turn up. The latter would never tolerate Stephen's idiosyncrasies nor his delight in the macabre.

It fell to Alan to shepherd them all out of the bar and up the stairs to the Red Room. Enid made sure that she sat between Alan and Barry, two decent men who would act as reliable buffers if Mary Millfield did deign to visit them. When they were all seated, Douglas Harlow counted the heads.

"Twelve of us," he noted. "Mary will make it thirteen. That's an omen."

"I hope that she comes," said Weller earnestly. "We can congratulate her."

"On what?"

"Her continued success," said Alan, jumping in before Harlow could deliver a quip to dispatch Clare into another bout of giggles. "Now, let's have no more carping about Mary," he went on, looking around the table. "She's one of us, remember."

Enid bit back a tart remark. She was still simmering with anger but she wanted to do nothing to upset Alan. He was such a nice man that he only saw the good qualities in people. While understanding the feuds and resentments that animated the others, he never took sides. Alan Pomeroy, she decided, was a species of saint. Enid wished that she had met him thirty years earlier, before she dedicated her life so recklessly to the teaching of Classics in a girls' school, an experience that soured her love of Greek and Latin while draining her energy until it almost expired. A romance with Alan would have rescued her from all that. It was far too late now, of course.

But she could still dream.

They were in the middle of the first course when Mary Millfield breezed in.

"Hello, everyone," she said, waving a hand that was encrusted with diamond rings. "No, don't get up, Alan. Barry, how nice to see you. Good Lord, it's Douglas. Are *you* still writing? What about

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you, Claude? Still marooned in your Picasso phase, I daresay." She peered at Enid. "Ah, I do believe that's Enid Smale."

And on she went around the table like visiting royalty. Mary Millfield had timed her entrance for maximum impact. While the rest of them had shared cars to the pub or come—in Stephen Rudry's case—on a battered motorcycle, she had been chauffeur-driven in a Daimler that could be summoned again instantly on her mobile phone. She was a big, full-bodied woman with exquisitely styled hair and a handsome face set in a smile of utter condescension. Her clothes and her manner reflected her enormous wealth. As she lowered herself into the remaining chair, she glared at the youngest person in the room and spoke with lofty disdain.

"Are *you* a mystery writer, young man?"

"Yes," Rudry murmured, shrinking back into his imitation-leather jacket.

"What have you written?"

"Stephen is an expert on Kentish murders," explained Alan, eager to deflect Mary's fire from the most vulnerable target. "But we must raise our glasses to you, Mary. Two books in the top ten. Well done!"

"Hear, hear!" shouted Weller, patting the table with his palm.

Mary beamed at the others. "Thank you, thank you."

Glasses were raised—reluctantly, in most cases—and the lady of the hour was duly toasted. Clare Thomason was clearly in awe of her and sat there with her mouth agape. Douglas Harlow was less respectful.

"I should have thought you'd have retired by now, Mary," he said.

"Dear me, no," she replied. "What would my public do?"

He grinned broadly. "Cheer, I expect."

Claude Cockspur chortled, Enid suppressed a laugh, Alan shot Harlow a look of reproof, and Clare did not know whether to giggle or be outraged. The rest of the members were torn between amusement and shock. None of them would have dared to make such a remark. Mary Millfield rose above it all.

"You're probably right, Douglas," she said calmly. "Which would be a precedent in itself, of course, because you've made such a career out of being wrong. Especially in your choice of subject matter for your books." She saw him wince. "Perhaps it is time for Mary Millfield to rest on her laurels. But my publishers won't hear of it. Every time I write a bestseller, they bind me hand and foot with more contracts. I'm helpless."

"You're the least helpless woman I've ever met," said Alan with Old World gallantry. "You could do *anything,* Mary."

"Except write a good book," muttered Harlow.

"Thank you, Alan," said Mary with a gracious nod in his direc-

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tion. "The simple fact is that I'm self-supporting now. Since my husband died, I have to rely entirely on my own income. I can't afford to stop writing."

Enid Smale squirmed in her seat. Mary Millfield earned more in a year than the rest of them put together. Not only were her books sold in large numbers, they had been adapted into long-running television series that achieved global success. It was like hearing Croesus plead poverty. There was a long silence. It was broken, improbably, by Stephen Rudry.

"I'm going to self-publish my next book," he announced.

"Whatever for?" sneered Mary.

"So that it looks exactly the way I want it to look."

"What's the title of the book, Stephen?" asked Alan.

"Sex Crimes in Victorian Canterbury."

"Don't do it, young man," warned Mary. "Vanity publishing is so pathetic."

"Not in every case," said Alan, trying to support Rudry.

"Have *you* been reduced to that as well, Alan?"

"No, no, Mary."

"I was surprised that your last book found a publisher, I must say."

Alan took the insult on the chin. "I just think that you're being unkind to Stephen. He's still new to this game. We all try to help each other in this group, not to make any disparaging remarks."

Mary widened her eyes. "Was I being disparaging?"

"When are you ever anything else?" said Harlow under his breath.

"I do apologize, young man," she said, gushing over Rudry. "I can't pretend that I'd ever buy a book on such a ridiculous subject, but I wish you well. Please forgive me."

Stephen Rudry was too crushed to reply. He retreated once more into the safety of his synthetic leather and would not even raise his eyes. Sensing disapproval from some quarters, Mary sought to palliate her critics with a display of charm.

"Let me give you some advice," she said with exaggerated sweetness. "Stephen, isn't it? Believe it or not, Stephen, I, too, was once a raw beginner. I, too, wrote with an 'L' plate tied to my backside. Getting started is hard work, I know, but I kept at it. And do you know how I carved out a successful career as a writer?"

Her lecture continued through the whole of the main course. Stephen himself was not listening but Clare Thomason hung on her every word as if she was hearing the Ten Commandments of writing. She even toyed with the notion of giving up her failed career as a painter in order to emulate Mary and to have a shared interest to discuss in postcoital moments with Douglas Harlow. Alan Pomeroy and Barry Weller took it in turns to indicate their

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agreement with the sage counsel being offered. Others tried to set up their own conversations but Mary's sermon eventually drowned them out.

Enid was quivering with fury. A pleasant meal had been turned into a personal appearance of the phenomenon that was Mary Millfield. Instead of enjoying St. Valentine's Day in the company of her elderly admirer and her friends, she was compelled to listen to the specious words of wisdom. Enid took refuge in drink, hoping that it would dull her brain and block out the insistent boasting of their unwelcome guest.

"And that's how I did it," declared Mary, sipping her Chablis. "I invented characters that people loved. There are twenty Inspector Redblood novels now and fourteen Lilian Pyewackets—she's the church organist who solves village murders that baffle Scotland Yard. Othello Johnson has had six adventures so far—he's my black private eye with an assistant called Iago Lorimer. I write those under a pseudonym."

"What is it?" wondered Harlow. "Desdemona Shakespeare?"

"Then, of course," continued Mary, surging over the interruption, "there are the cases involving Strawberry the Cat, the ones that feature Daphne Unwin, the first female chief constable, and the Sergeant Ali Khan mysteries. Best of all, in my opinion," she added, opening her handbag, "is the protagonist in my new book, Commander Stilgoe, who is assigned to Interpol on a roving commission. By the way, did I tell you that I'd just been awarded the Jagged Dagger by way of a lifetime's achievement?" She extracted the object from her handbag and held it up. "Here it is! Vicious-looking weapon, isn't it? But rather appropriate. I've always favored stabbing. Twenty-five of my victims fell to the knife."

"I prefer strangling during sexual intercourse," said Stephen Rudry.

The announcement stunned everyone momentarily. Eyes aflame, Stephen sat there and thought about some of the more horrendous sex crimes that he had been researching. It was Douglas Harlow who broke the silence.

"No wonder you have difficulty finding girlfriends, Stephen," he said.

Everyone laughed except Mary, annoyed that the limelight had suddenly shifted to a callow young man. Noting her irritation, Alan tried to appease her by showing an interest in her latest award.

"Do you think we might see the Jagged Dagger?" he asked.

"Rather!" said Weller. "It's a magnificent achievement, Mary."

"And well deserved."

"Thank you," said Mary, lapping up the praise.

She handed over the exhibit and it was passed around the table

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so that each person could study it in turn. It was a long-bladed knife, made of steel but covered in rust-colored paint for effect. Inscribed in gold leaf on the handle was a dedication to Mary Millfield as the Queen of Crime. It was an award that none of the other writers there would ever aspire to and they scrutinized it with a mixture of awe and envy. Clare Thomason stroked it wistfully and heaved a sigh.

Enid Smale was almost completely insulated by now from Mary. Four large glasses of Beaujolais, combined with the reassuring proximity of Alan Pomeroy, helped to shut out the sound of Mary's voice. The main course was over. Enid only had to survive the dessert and the coffee before she was free once more. While the chauffeur whisked the self-styled new Agatha Christie off to her estate near Rye, Enid would be driven home by her devoted admirer. With that treat in mind, she began to rally.

Mary Millfield cut short her recovery. Having delivered one long lecture, she now took it upon herself to distribute unsought advice to all and sundry, like a Lady of the Manor, throwing pieces of stale bread to a cowering peasantry. Nobody escaped her.

"As for you, Douglas," she said, wagging an admonitory finger, "you really must try to get away from the Welsh valleys. It makes your books so limited, so provincial, and so depressingly *Welsh.*" She turned to her next victim. "The same goes for you, Barry. Much as I like the Napoleonic Wars as a backdrop, they are dreadfully overused. As a genre, costume crime is played out. Fresh woods and pastures new, Barry. That's what you should be telling yourself." Her eye fell on Enid Smale. "When it comes to Enid, I fear, there's not much I can say about her books except that they lack any real thrust. I mean, who wants to read stories that feature a retired professor of Classics? Clever, they are, I grant you, and shot through with a strange irony. But they have nothing to say to the average reader, and the classical allusions are very confusing. Find something new to say, Enid," she instructed. "Or do as I do. Say something old in a novel way."

Jerked out of her reverie, Enid writhed afresh. As each author and artist in the group was subjected to acid criticism, her rage slowly built. It was when her beloved Alan Pomeroy was attacked that she felt the blood pulsing in her temples.

"I'm sure that Alan won't mind my saying this," said Mary with a supercilious smile, "because he is a professional. And the mark of a professional is the ability to take constructive criticism. His first book was almost brilliant, worthy of Margery Allingham at her best or of Dorothy L. Sayers at her worst. That's a great compliment to him. But both Margery and Dorothy have had their day. They're as useless as last Sunday's newspapers. Stop keeping one foot in the past, Alan. That's what ruined your latest novel,"

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she explained, "and why I felt duty bound to review it as honestly as I did. The characters lacked interest, the plot lacked credibility, and the whole thing was woefully static. Most worrying of all was the fact that your prose was so *tired*. I think you need a rest before you tackle another book. Give yourself a year or two off, Alan. Write less and read more. It's time for you to move into the twenty-first century."

And on she went. It was a devastating attack on a man incapable of defending himself. Dear, kind, considerate, gentlemanly Alan Pomeroy, a gifted author with a string of excellent books behind him, was being ruthlessly torn apart in public. It was quite unforgivable. Enid could withstand the unprovoked assault on her own work but she would not ignore the gratuitous injury to her friend. Revenge stirred.

"No coffee for me," said Mary as the waitress appeared to take orders. "I really must be going, I'm afraid. I always answer my fan mail on Sunday afternoons and that takes *hours*. Excuse me while I powder my nose."

When she left the room, there was a collective sigh of relief. Claude Cockspur clapped his hands. Stephen Rudry even found the courage to emerge from his leathered refuge. Alan tried to make light of the vicious criticism he had endured but Enid did not stay to hear him. With the Jagged Dagger gripped in her hand, she went off in pursuit of her celebrated prey. Douglas Harlow held up an empty glass.

"Hold on, Enid," he joked. "If you ask Her Majesty to pee into this, we can probably sell it for a small fortune to one of her fans."

But the bristling Enid had gone out through the door. With a speed she did not know that she possessed, she stormed into the Ladies' Toilet at the moment when Mary Millfield was about to enter a cubicle. Mary saw the dagger.

"Thank you so much for bringing it, Enid," she said, as if addressing a servant, "but this is hardly the place to give it to me, is it?"

"It's the best possible place!" insisted Enid.

With strength borne of anger and hatred, she thrust the dagger deep into the other's ample bosom. Mary gasped in pain, stared in disbelief, staggered backwards, then collapsed in a heap on the floor."

Enid smiled in triumph. "You did say that you favored stabbing."

As soon as it was clear that Mary was dead, Enid went off to the bar and suggested to the landlord that he might summon the police as there had been an unfortunate accident in the Ladies' Toilet. Returning to her friends in the Red Room, she found them still bubbling with animosity towards Mary Millfield. Notwith-

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standing the punishment he had taken, Alan Pomeroy was actually trying to speak up for the woman. Enid enjoyed her moment.

"Mary Millfield is dead," she declared. "I've just put that Jagged Dagger through her black heart."

They laughed at first, but the sudden appearance of the landlord stifled their mirth at once. The man was horrified that a crime had been committed on his premises.

"I must ask you all to remain here until the police come," he said. "One of your members has been murdered. That famous lady whose picture is always in the papers."

Everyone was shocked. Alan Pomeroy was distraught.

"Enid," he said in dismay. "Why on earth did you do it?"

"Because of the way that she attacked you," replied Enid. "She told me that I needed a new departure. Well, I found one. I've killed off Inspector Redblood, Lilian Pyewacket, Othello Johnson, Iago Lorimer, Strawberry the Cat, Chief Constable Daphne Unwin, Sergeant Ali Khan, Commander Stilgoe, and all the other *boring nonentities from the pen of Mary Millfield.* In short," she went on, raising both arms in victory, "I'm responsible for a St. Valentine's Day massacre!"

They stared at her in blank amazement. Alan was aghast. Barry Weller was on the verge of tears. Clare Thomason turned white. Claude Cockspur actually stopped thinking that he was Picasso. Douglas Harlow could, for once, find nothing comical to say. And Stephen Rudry looked disappointed that there was no sexual element in the crime. Enid Smale grinned at them.

"I feel wonderful," she said. "Before the police come to arrest me, let me buy everyone a drink. After all, we have something to celebrate. We've escaped forever from the clutches of that monstrous woman. Now then, what will you all have?"

A slow smile spread across the face of Alan Pomeroy.

"Mine's a Bloody Mary!" he said. ●

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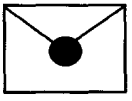

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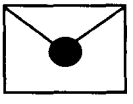

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The MAN-ifold MISS-teries of Crime

by Marie E. Truitt

Crime is an equal opportunity adventure . . .
A he-male and she-male bisexual venture.
We say "MALE-factors" . . . but females play, too;
The name MISS-demeanor one can't MISS-construe.
"HIZzoner," we say of the one on the bench,
But "HIZzoner" could very well be a fair wench,
Mistakenly robed in a MAN-tle as judge. . . .
(And could our male arbiter ever MISS-judge?!)
It sometimes appears the distaff side of crime
Is shifting its gears to MISS-conduct big-time.
There's MISS-creants wreaking all MISS-chief galore;
There's MISS-fits, and MISS-anthropes . . . Perps by the score.

But we have a MAN-date which prompts us to name
Some masculine capers . . . HIS claim to crime fame.
He ain't MISS-behavin'! MISS-deeds these are not!
He's pure MALE-dicted and red-hot to trot!
We move up to FELLOW-ny . . . giant step for MAN-kind!
Leaving those petty MISS-steps far behind.
Consider, one moment, the agile romantic . . .
The swashbucklin' chap with the swashbucklin' antic.
Tall walls he negotiates. It's a bird! It's a plane!
It's Second-story MAN, who takes pains for his gain!
And is there a crime that we dub "person-slaughter"?
Forbid!!! It's the MAN-ly pursuit of MAN-slaughter!
And then when the law catches up with the dude,
And grabs him in manner that's downright most rude;
We dub that MAN-handling . . . don't you agree? . . .
And he's shackled with MAN-acles, as he ought to be!
Please note . . . he presents his airtight AL-ibi!
That starts with big "AL" . . . It's not ALICE-ibi!
And he hires MALE lawyers, or he'd get real queasy;
They never MISS-counsel . . . and he can rest easy.
It's comforting there's a career so eclectic. . . .
It's so user-friendly, albeit quite hectic.
So, let's drink a toast to the whole crime SHE-bang!
Oh my! I *am* sorry! The whole crime HE-bang?!!!

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Art by June Levine

CUBA LIBRO

by Edward D. Hoch

Andrew Kogan was the last person on earth I'd have chosen for my boss, if I'd had a choice. Ives and I became involved with him because she wanted to visit Europe last summer and he ran a courier service that offered free airfare and hotel rooms to people like me, a graduate student without much money. We'd gotten as far as London, saw the sights, and became involved in a murder. I figured that was all we wanted from Mr. Kogan, especially since the last we heard the police were holding him for violation of an American embargo.

But here it was early January and Ives and I were returning from a messy game of paintball with friends when he called me on my cell phone. "Walt Stanton?" he asked, and I recognized his nervous voice at once.

"Mr. Kogan?"

"That's right. How are you and Miss Ives these days?"

"Fine, thank you. I've just one more semester at Princeton for my graduate degree."

"You're between semesters now, right?"

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"For another week." I was beginning to suspect he had another courier job for me.

"I have a few days' work that might interest you, but I can't go into it on the phone. Could you come into Manhattan?"

"Is this another courier job?"

"Yes and no. I'd need to see you tomorrow, around ten if possible."

That would be Thursday and I had no commitments. "I'll be there."

When I finished talking, Ives just stared at me. She was tall and attractive, with full lips, long brown hair, and legs with the grip of a python. We'd been together since she insisted on moving in with me at the end of last spring's semester.

Her given name was Juliet, but everyone at college called her Ives.

"You want to get involved with Kogan again after what happened last time?" she asked, hardly able to believe it.

"I might as well hear what he has to say."

"I'd better go with you so you don't agree to anything foolish."

"He didn't say anything about you," I pointed out.

"He gets one, he gets us both. We're a team, remember?"

"I know. Courier and Ives."

"Damned right!"

I knew immediately that Kogan wasn't pleased when Ives walked into his office with me the following morning. "Oh, Miss Ives, isn't it?" he greeted her, making her name sound like a bad taste in his mouth. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I look after Stanton's interests," she said, taking a seat and curling her long legs around each other. "The last we heard you were in trouble with the law."

"That was nothing," he told us. "A misunderstanding. It'll be settled soon."

I nodded but had to add, "I noticed your office door no longer says Air Couriers International."

"I've cut back on my operations. The government was giving me too much trouble. I'll come right to the point. I need you to act as a reverse courier on this one, bringing a package back to me."

Stanton and Ives, the young couple who sleuthed their way through London in their series debut, "Courier and Ives" (11/02), are back in another overseas case. This time a murder near the Hemingway house in Cuba pits the duo against a wily con man and others hoping to make a killing off some unsuspecting Americans. His lively new characters have inspired Mr. Hoch to pen a particularly clever whodunit. ✝

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"From where?" Ives asked suspiciously.

"Cuba."

"That's another embargo violation, isn't it?"

"No, no. This is just a personal thing. A man is selling me a book."

"Why can't he mail it?" Ives asked, not about to let him off the hook.

He ignored her question and turned to me. "Can you do the job or not? I'll pay all your expenses for two days in Cuba, plus a two-thousand-dollar fee."

"That would have to be for each of us," I said before Ives could make the demand.

Kogan made a sour face. "What can she contribute that you can't do alone?"

"Shall I tell him?" Ives asked with a devilish grin.

I ignored her and told him, "A young couple traveling together would attract less notice than me traveling alone."

Kogan sighed, removed his glasses, and rubbed his forehead. "All right," he said finally. "I don't have much choice. I need it done this weekend. I'll get two round-trip tickets for you, and book two nights at a hotel. There's no plane service from the United States. You'll have to fly to Montreal and then switch to Cubana Airlines. All visitors need a tourist card, which replaces a visa. It's valid for one month. I'll get them for you through the travel agency."

"When do we leave?" I asked.

"Tomorrow. You'll meet the man sometime Saturday and fly back to Montreal on Sunday with the book. I have already arranged for payment to be transferred to his account."

"Will your secretary meet us again at the airport?"

"Miss Gordon is no longer with me. I will meet you myself at LaGuardia with the tickets and all the information you'll need. I'll give you two thousand now and the rest when you return."

"Why can't you fly down there yourself?" Ives wanted to know.

"Due to my present legal problems I have had to surrender my passport temporarily," he said simply. There was no arguing with that. "Meet me at the airport at nine o'clock and bring everything you need." He glanced at us distastefully and added, "Bring your own condoms. They're hard to find in Cuba and of very poor quality."

The following morning he met us with the tickets, our reservation at an inexpensive Havana hotel, and two thousand dollars in cash. "You must have a reservation for the first two nights," Kogan explained, "or the Cuban tourist office chooses a hotel for you. I've told your contact you'll be staying here."

By eleven o'clock Ives and I were on our way to Cuba with a

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detour to Montreal. It was evening by the time we reached our Havana hotel, a little three-story building next to a cigar factory. Ives took one look at our room and turned sour.

"In London we didn't have bugs crawling up the wall," she complained, squashing one with a blow from her backpack.

"Come on, it's an adventure!"

"So's dying, but I'm not ready for it yet. This is the last time we get involved with that creep Kogan."

The time in Havana was the same as New York, and both of us were hungry. We walked a few blocks to central Havana and Ives was amazed at the number of old American cars we saw, many of them like new. "It's like a movie set," she said.

"We've had a trade embargo for over forty years. The American cars are all from the nineteen fifties, but their owners really keep them in good shape."

Presently we found a little restaurant with a spacious terrace. Even on a January evening the temperature was in the low seventies so Ives decided she'd like to eat outdoors. The only dish on the menu was chicken, prepared in a variety of ways, but that was good enough for us. They brought us white wine, and at the end of the meal there was a fine Havana cigar for me.

"You're not going to smoke that thing, are you?" Ives asked.

"I'll save it till we get back to the room and light it up in bed."

"Like hell you will! Give it to me." She tucked it away in her purse. "Now who's this person we're supposed to meet in the morning?"

"Ramon Cartuga. He's one of the caretakers at Finca Vigia."

"What's that?"

"The house where Ernest Hemingway lived. It's just nine miles outside Havana. We can hire a taxi."

"Is he the one with the book?"

"Apparently. You know as much as I do."

In the morning we had a small buffet breakfast in the basement of the hotel and found a private official taxi that pulled up just as we left the place. Such taxis had no meters, though there was a photo ID of the driver and he wore a black cap that said *taxi* on the front. He was willing to take us to Finca Vigia for five dollars American, a reasonable sum. The car was a green 1957 Buick in perfect condition, and the driver's name was Pancho Manati. He was a muscular young man whom Ives immediately found attractive, nudging me and grinning as we slipped into the backseat. He seemed honest enough, and when I told him our destination he advised, "Do not waste a trip. The house is not open to the public. You can see only the gardens."

"That's all right," Ives told him. "We're flower lovers." As if to prove it, she held up her camera.

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The morning was overcast with a threat of rain, the temperature a bit cooler than the day of our arrival. There were people in the downtown streets, but not as many as we might have expected in a city of two million. Ives and I had both taken Spanish in high school, and we amused ourselves by trying to translate the signs on shops and buildings as we passed.

"Librería," she read. "Isn't that a bit small for a library?"

"It means *bookstore,* Ives. You just got a failing grade in Spanish 101. *Libro* is book and *librería* is bookstore. *Biblioteca* is library."

"I didn't like my Spanish teacher," she murmured with a bit of a pout.

The Hemingway place at Finca Vigia consisted of his one-story villa, a smaller guesthouse, a swimming pool, and a two-story tower separate from the house. It would have been a place of beauty at some time in the past. Now the shacks of the poor crowded in upon it from the south and gave an obvious explanation as to why the place was not open to the public. Even as our taxi pulled up, we saw some police cars out in front with their red lights flashing, a universal sign of trouble.

"You want me to keep going?" our driver asked.

"No," I decided. "You'd better stop." I told Ives to remain in the car till I determined what was going on.

A few neighbors had appeared to see what the trouble was, but not as many as we'd have seen back in the States. Apparently the Cuban poor wanted nothing to do with the police. I saw one man standing to the side, better dressed than most, with slicked-back hair and a black moustache. "What happened here?" I asked.

"There has been a killing. Perhaps someone was trying to break into the house."

"I've come to see Ramon Cartuga, one of the caretakers. Is he here?"

The man studied me more closely. "I am Carlos Cartuga. Ramon is my brother. The police are questioning him over there."

I followed his pointing finger and saw a younger, clean-shaven man of the same general appearance gesturing while he spoke to a uniformed officer. A few moments later the officer shrugged and waved him away. He walked over to his brother, ignoring me, and started running on in Spanish I couldn't follow. Finally his brother motioned toward me and said in English, "This American came to see you."

A flicker of fright seemed to pass over the man's features. He shook his head rapidly. "No, not now! I cannot talk now."

He moved away but I followed. "When, then? I come from Kogan." I placed a hand on his arm as if to restrain him, but immediately his older brother called out, "Ramon, do you need me?"

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"No!" he insisted, and then whispered to me, "There is a cantina down the road with a striped awning out front. Meet me there at noon."

"What did he say?" Ives wanted to know.

"The police were questioning him and his big brother was there. He couldn't talk. He'll meet us at noon at a cantina down the road."

"That's over an hour from now." She called up to our driver. "Pancho, is there any place near here you can take us for an hour or so?"

He thought about it. "There is a crocodile farm but it has an unfortunate smell."

She turned to me. "Are you game?"

"How much extra is this going to cost us?" I asked the driver.

Pancho shrugged, tugging at the visored cap that was too tight for his head. "For ten dollars I will stay with you until four o'clock when I go off duty. You will not get a better bargain from any other driver. I was born in Havana and I know the city and its suburbs like the back of my hand."

"All right," I agreed. "It's off to the crocodile farm."

We quickly learned he hadn't exaggerated about the smell. We ventured close to one of the lakes where the smaller and younger crocodiles were on display and were quickly driven back by the odor, choosing to view the rest from a nearby watchtower. "How do you think they manage to make love?" Ives wondered.

"Same way as everyone else," I ventured. "The smell doesn't bother them a bit."

Pancho deposited us at the cantina with the striped awning a little before twelve, parked his taxi down the block, and strolled over to watch some kids playing a Cuban version of Little League baseball. The cantina was named Colina Largo, which both of us thought might mean Big Hill. We chose a table with a wobbly leg and ordered a couple of beers. At five minutes after noon Ramon Cartuga came in and walked casually to the bar. He ordered a Corona and stood drinking it as he glanced around the place. Acting surprised to see me, he strolled over and joined us with his beer.

"Good to see you again," he said in passable English for anyone who might be listening.

I shook his hand like an old friend. "This is Ives," I told him and she lifted a finger in silent greeting. "What happened out there this morning?"

"A man was found dead in the gardens. A blow to the head had killed him. His wallet and other identification were missing. No one seems to know who he was."

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"What was your brother doing there?"

"Looking for his wife. It is a long sad story that has nothing to do with the reason for your visit."

"Let's get to it, then. You have a package, a book, for Andrew Kogan."

"Correct."

"Do you have it with you?"

"Of course not! With a killer prowling the area I could not risk it. The dead man was about my age. For all I know, the killer mistook him for me. The book is so valuable I could not even risk mailing it to Kogan. It might have been held up in customs."

"Do you have any enemies?" Ives asked.

"A man with a valuable treasure always has enemies."

"What is it about this book that makes it so valuable?" I asked. "Just that it's from the Hemingway house?"

"You will see soon enough. The police have removed the body and I must go back to work at one o'clock. Come by a little after one and I can show you around as my personal guest."

"What about me?" Ives asked, not wanting to be left out.

"It will be better if you wait outside."

As usual I jumped in before Ives could start berating him. "Showing a couple around would be less suspicious than just taking me in."

"Perhaps," he agreed dubiously. "But I must do it between one and two, while the other custodian is at lunch."

Over another beer and a sandwich Ramon relaxed enough to tell us about his brother. "He is forty-five, eight years older than me, and married to a passionate young woman named Dolores who is ruining his life. She has taken up with a man named Giraldo Soya, a Brazilian with a shady past, and my brother is half mad with jealousy."

"Perhaps this Soya was the murder victim," Ives suggested.

But Ramon Cartuga shook his head. "I know Soya. He is younger, larger, and more handsome than the victim."

"This doesn't concern us anyway," I decided. "You'd better get back to the house and we'll come in about fifteen minutes."

Ives and I walked over to the baseball game where our driver was still watching the kids play. "There is nothing like the young," he said. "I could watch them all day."

"Pancho, we're going back to the Hemingway house," I told him. "Pick us up in thirty minutes."

"I will be there."

Ramon greeted us at the door and hurried us inside. "This is very irregular," he said. "You must leave before Jose returns at two."

"We'll be gone," I assured him.

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The one-story villa seemed quite spacious inside, especially the bright drawing room whose walls were decorated with African trophy heads from Hemingway's hunting days. A low three-shelf bookcase ran around much of the room. "Didn't he have a house in Key West part of the time?" Ives asked.

"He left Key West in nineteen thirty-nine and moved to a Havana hotel with his new wife, Martha Gellhorn." Ramon had obviously made a study of the writer's life, perhaps preparing for the day when he might be guiding tourists through the residence. "They rented this place and then bought it the following year. Of course Finca Vigia had thickets of African thornbush and tall trees in those days. There are still palms, mangos, and hibiscus outside. Maybe that's why he liked it." He motioned through a window. "Hemingway always loved cats in large numbers. The ground floor of the tower over there was reserved for their fifty-seven cats—"

"Fifty-seven?" I repeated.

"Oh yes. I understand his Key West house still has scores of descendants of the original Florida cats. Hemingway had a study on the second floor of the tower but felt it was too isolated. He preferred to work in this study." He opened the door to a smaller room where a large desk was surrounded by bookcases, with a narrow bed against one wall. "That buffalo head is from his first safari," Ramon informed us.

Ives ran her hand across the picture- and memento-covered desktop. "This is a great desk."

"He never used it for his writing. He wrote standing up, with a portable Royal typewriter on the shelf here. He piled his mail on the bed. There's a dining room over here with more animal heads. By nineteen sixty he was living here with his last wife, Mary Welsh. He had no complaint with Castro, but his health was failing. They went to America, where he had a new house in Ketchum, Idaho. He must have planned on returning to Cuba, because he left everything but his manuscripts behind—his typewriter, hunting trophies, valuable paintings, and a library of eight thousand books. But after a time at the Mayo Clinic he went on to the house in Ketchum where he killed himself a year later."

"How sad," Ives murmured.

"But what is this book that's so valuable?" I wanted to know.

The caretaker walked purposefully to one of the crowded shelves and removed several books to reveal a single slender volume with a familiar jacket.

"It's *The Old Man and the Sea!*" Ives exclaimed. "I have that identical copy back home."

"Not identical, no." He opened the back of the book and showed us small handwriting on the blank pages and the flyleaf. "In the back of this copy is an unknown short story in Hemingway's own

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handwriting, a sort of coda to the novel."

"Does no one know of this?" I asked.

"I have told my brother, that is all."

"Was that wise?"

"I would trust him with my life. He is the one who put me in touch with Mr. Kogan, and I faxed him a page of the story. He thinks the book could be auctioned off for a large sum of money, perhaps a hundred thousand dollars or more." He went behind the desk and produced a manilla envelope, slipping the slim volume inside and sealing it. "Why did Kogan send you instead of coming himself?"

"He's having passport difficulties," I answered. "I did work for him in the past and he knows he can trust me."

Ives was still thinking about the murder. "Is there any chance this morning's killing had something to do with the book?"

"Perhaps. But this is a poor neighborhood now, and the crime rate is high. It was probably a simple robbery. Come, you must leave before Jose returns from his lunch."

But at the door we found our exit blocked by an angry young woman with wild black hair. "Where is he?" she demanded of Ramon. "Where is my husband?"

"Carlos was here this morning," he replied with a shrug. "I haven't seen him since."

"Giraldo is missing, too. If Carlos has harmed him—"

"Calm down!" Ramon ordered, gripping her by the shoulders. "Can't you see I have visitors? Mr. Stanton and Miss Ives, this is my sister-in-law, Dolores Cartuga."

"I just saw your partner Jose at the cantina and he told me someone was killed here this morning," she said, barely acknowledging our presence.

"One of the locals. I saw the body. It was no one I knew."

A short stocky man had turned off the road and was walking toward us. I had seen him being questioned by the police that morning. "Jose!" Dolores called out. "What do you know about the killing?"

He said something in Spanish but then switched to English, perhaps for our benefit. "*Nada.* Nothing. I found the body when I came to work and called the police. His head was caved in, as if he'd been hit with a pipe or a wrench. The police said his wallet was missing. That's all I know."

"I'm still looking for Carlos. He didn't come into the cantina after I left, did he?"

Jose assured her he had not seen her husband since morning, and Ives poked me to signal we should be on our way. We thanked Ramon for the private tour, leaving the three of them at the entrance. We didn't see Pancho at first, but then his taxi pulled up from where he'd parked down the road. "Back to Havana," I told him. "To our hotel."

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"Very good."

But we'd driven just past the cantina when a police roadblock stopped us. Pancho leaned out of the car. *"Boa tarde!* Good afternoon! What is the trouble here?"

A uniformed officer walked over to him. "We're investigating a murder on this road early today. Were you out here this morning?"

"No. I am a taxi driver from Havana. These are my passengers." He showed an identification card but the officer was already peering at Ives and me.

"Americano?" he asked.

I nodded. "We were touring the gardens of the Hemingway house at Finca Vigia."

He nodded and waved us through as the next car pulled up. "That was easy," Pancho remarked as we sped away.

I had placed the manilla envelope containing the book on the seat between us, and Ives picked it up. "You know what this is, Stanton? It's the MacGuffin, just like in those old Hitchcock movies."

"The what?"

"The object or element that the whole plot's built around. It can be insignificant in itself, but it propels the main action."

"I'd hardly call this book a MacGuffin. It's more of a Maltese Falcon, isn't it?"

"I'm going to take a closer look at it," she decided, and before I could stop her she ran a fingernail under the flap and unsealed the envelope. *The Old Man and the Sea* slid into her hand and she opened it to the final pages.

They were blank.

"Turn around!" I ordered our driver. "We're going back to Finca Vigia."

"What happened?" Ives asked, still holding the book.

"That rascal Ramon switched copies on us. He dropped the real copy on the chair behind the desk and slipped this one into the envelope. He's already got Kogan's money for it, and when we delivered the wrong copy it would just be our word against his."

Pancho made a quick U-turn on the dusty road and drove back the way we had come. "What are we going to do now?" Ives wanted to know.

"Confront him with it. Demand the real book."

"Let's think about this first," Ives insisted, always practical. "Maybe Ramon tried this stunt before. Maybe the man who was killed did the same thing we're doing. He confronted Ramon over the switch and got himself killed."

"We'll be ready if he tries anything like that."

Pancho kept the taxi well hidden on the road and we approached

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the Hemingway house on foot. It was Jose who answered the door. "Ramon is gone," he informed us. "He took the rest of the day off."

"He's made off with the book," Ives decided. "We'll never catch him now."

"He may have gone to his brother's house, since he admitted telling Carlos about it." I turned to Jose for help. "Do you know where Carlos Cartuga lives?"

He grinned. "I know where Dolores Cartuga lives. Everyone knows that."

I jotted down the address and we ran back to the waiting taxi. "Take us to Carlos Cartuga's home," I told Pancho, handing him the address. "And hurry!"

He sped away down the road as fast as the old Buick would go. In the backseat Ives and I were developing a plan of action. The house, about twenty minutes away, was on a small farm with fields of tobacco and sugar cane. The driver seemed fearful of going through the entrance gate and parked on the road.

"You go the rest of the way on foot," he told us, "and I wait here. Sometimes these farmers do not like strange cars on their property."

That sounded odd, and I wondered if Cartuga's fields might contain more than met the eye. Ives and I walked up the driveway to the house. I rang the bell and peered in through the screen door to see Dolores coming across the living room to answer it. "I met you at Finca Vigia," she said, recognizing us at once. "What do you want?"

"We're looking for your brother-in-law, Ramon. Is he here?"

She nodded. "He might be back in the barn or in the tobacco field with Carlos."

As I started off the porch she cautioned, "My husband always carries a shotgun in the field, to guard against trespassers."

"Thanks for the warning," I said, and bounded off the steps.

"And stay out of the tobacco field," she yelled after me.

"Stanton!" Ives called out. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To find Ramon."

"He'll blow you away with that shotgun."

"Carlos has the shotgun, not Ramon."

"They're brothers, for God's sake!"

I kept on going, heading for the tobacco field where the mature plants were some five feet tall and ready for harvesting beneath their fine sheets of cotton fabric. "Tobacco is a winter crop here, planted from October to January and harvested after about forty-five days," I explained to Ives.

"What are the cotton sheets for?"

"To protect against too much sun and insects." I ducked underneath the fabric, lowering my voice.

"What did you do, take a course in it?"

"Watched a documentary on PBS."

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But we'd been spotted, and the blast of a shotgun shredded the tobacco leaves above our heads. We dropped to the ground and lay there motionless. "Stanton?" she asked after a few moments' silence. "Are you alive?"

"Shush!" I cautioned.

I expected one or both of the Cartuga brothers to come looking for us, but nothing happened. Presently I decided we were safe and let my fingers trail up Ives's jeans to her hip, but she slapped my hand away. "Stop that! I never made love in a tobacco field and I'm not going to start now, not with a killer out there."

I was silent awhile longer but then whispered, "Ives?"

"What now?"

"Why didn't you like your Spanish teacher?"

She sighed. "He tried to teach us Portuguese along with Spanish because they are similar, but learning one language at a time was tough enough for me."

I thought about that. "Come on," I said finally. "Whoever fired that shotgun isn't coming after us."

I slowly raised my head above the tobacco leaves, half expecting another shotgun blast at any moment. What I saw was Dolores, standing on the farmhouse porch with the shotgun. As soon as she saw me she raised it to her shoulder. "Wait!" I shouted. "Don't shoot!"

"Get off our property," she yelled back. "I won't miss you next time. I told you to stay out of the tobacco field. It's our most valuable crop."

"You didn't help it too much with that shotgun blast."

"Just get out of here."

"I thought you said your husband had the shotgun."

"We're a two-shotgun family. And here comes the other one, right behind you."

I turned to see Carlos and Ramon walking toward the house. Carlos indeed had another shotgun, which he passed to his younger brother when he recognized us. He said something in Spanish, apparently telling Ramon we were his problem.

"This isn't good," Ives decided. "We've got shotguns fore and aft."

I held up my hands to show them I was unarmed. "We just want to talk about the book, Ramon."

He came a few steps closer, holding the shotgun aimed at the ground. "What about it?"

"The last pages are blank. I think you made a mistake and gave us the wrong copy. Mr. Kogan won't be very happy since he's already paid the money into your account."

"That is your word against mine. I delivered the proper book." The barrel of the shotgun raised a bit.

But Carlos placed a restraining hand on the weapon. "Give him the book, Ramon, before this goes any further. Isn't it bad enough there has been one killing already?"

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"I had nothing to do with that!"

"Who was the man that died?" Ives asked.

"Probably one of the homeless people from down the hill," Dolores speculated.

"But his wallet was taken," Ives reminded them. "Who would kill a homeless man for his wallet?"

"Perhaps he never had one," Carlos said. "But we are talking in circles. Give him the book, Ramon."

He motioned toward the house. "In there. I'll get it."

We waited outside, not trusting any of them at that moment. Presently Ramon emerged with the book, opening it to show us the handwritten story in the back. "I am truly sorry," he said, avoiding our eyes.

"Now get out," Dolores told us, still holding her shotgun.

As we walked away from the house, Ives grumbled, "You'd think we were the criminals."

"At least this proves the book is genuine. Otherwise he wouldn't have stolen it."

"Wrong, Stanton. This proves the book is a fake."

"How's that?"

"If the book was real there'd be no point in going through the charade of switching books on us. As soon as Kogan's money was deposited to his account he could have taken book and money and gone off with them. He wanted us to see the book, to vouch for its existence, but then he took it back before experts could examine it." We were nearing the road as she opened the back cover. "See? This wouldn't have shown up on the faxed copy, but an expert might determine the writing was done with a type of pen not developed until after Hemingway's death."

"All right," I told her. "I'll concede you that point. But I know who the dead man in the garden is."

"How—?" she began as Pancho pulled up with our taxi.

"Give me the book and get in."

"Stanton—"

"Where to now?" our driver asked.

"Stanton, who is the dead man? Tell me this instant!"

"His name is Pancho Manati and he's a taxi driver."

She frowned, not yet comprehending. "That's the same name as—"

He turned in his seat, pointing an automatic pistol at us, and that's when I hit him across the eyes with *The Old Man and the Sea.*

After that I had to explain it all to Ives, and to the local police. "Didn't you think it odd that he never pulled right up to our destinations? He always waited down the block, out of sight, because these people knew him by his real name of Giraldo Soya."

"Dolores's lover!"

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"Of course. We learned early on that he was missing and she was trying to find him. He heard about the book and set out to steal it from us."

"How did he hear about it?"

I shrugged. "It's no great mystery. Ramon told his brother and he told his wife and she told her lover. Of course, only Ramon knew it was a fake. Soya decided the best time to steal the book would be in our taxi, so he called a taxi out to Finca Vigia and killed the driver with a pipe or wrench early this morning. Removing his identification, he left the body in the garden and drove into Havana to conveniently pull up when we came out of the hotel. If there were other taxis waiting he probably paid them to leave. Of course, Kogan had told Ramon where we'd be staying and the word must have reached Dolores, who told Soya. He had a photo of himself to paste over the driver's photo in the taxi, and he took the driver's cap that said *taxi* on it. Only the driver was smaller than Soya and the cap was a tight fit."

"How did he recognize us?"

"There weren't too many young American couples staying there, and he might have bribed the room clerk for a description of us."

"So even if you suspected the driver was a fake, how did you know it was Soya?"

"The driver told us he'd been born in Havana, but when the police stopped us and unnerved him he greeted them with *Boa tarde* for *Good afternoon.* The Spanish is *Buenas tardes,* of course. *Boa tarde* is Portuguese, and Ramon told us Soya was from Brazil, where they speak Portuguese. You should have paid more attention to that Spanish teacher."

"Why couldn't he have simply stolen the book from the Hemingway house without killing anyone?"

"There are eight thousand books at Finca Vigia and no one had told him which book it was."

Ives looked unhappy. "Would he have killed us, too?"

"Probably. I think he was all set to do it when we left Finca Vigia with the book, until we looked at it and discovered Ramon had switched copies. Then he had to stay with us until we recovered it. Of course, time was running out for him. The body would probably have been identified through fingerprints by evening."

"What do we do with the book now?" she wondered.

"Deliver it to Kogan as planned and collect the rest of our money. Let him worry about its authenticity."

So that's what we did. Ives carried it in her hand going through customs and they never looked at it. But they confiscated the Cuban cigar they found in her purse. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

BIRD OF PARADISE

by Ruth Dwyer

"Well," he said, the snake dangling from his forearm, "every group is an ecosystem with its own life force, it's own . . ." Here he paused for a moment to select the precise term. ". . . momentum," he decided.

What a pompous ass, I thought, but the only way to get myself out of the trunk of his car was to cater to his pretensions. It was too bad that my hands were cuffed to the scorpion cage near my head; it made things a little more difficult.

Ruth Dwyer has a Ph.D. in film studies and is the author of *Malcolm St. Clair: His Films, 1915-1948*. She tells us that she "lives just outside of Toronto with a tall son, a short dog, and a medium-sized husband, all of whom listen to Charlie Parker." Charlie Parker figures, distantly, in Ms. Dwyer's fiction debut, which also features many kinds of wildlife. The author describes herself as a bird watcher. ¶

He inhaled, slowly raised his left forearm, looked his snake in the eye, and blew smoke rings around its upturned head. Twice. The snake writhed a little as it faded a bit in the cloud of Marlboro, and gave every appearance of enjoying it. It occurred to me as I looked up at them, silhouetted against the southern Florida palms, that they were both nicotine addicts.

And it annoyed me that he was rifling through my wallet, particularly when I saw him remove all of my folding money and slip it into his pants pocket. I twitched a little. The trouble with lying on your back in the trunk of a Jaguar is that the area is not spacious. One's body gets twisted and it tends to cause small kinks in both the large and small muscle groups, no matter how toned or fit the body may be. Muscle movement was soon going to be necessary.

Mindful of the scorpion, and keeping movement to an absolute minimum, I attempted to adjust my right foot. The heel of my

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right stiletto seemed to have caught on a large envelope, the padded manilla kind, I think, and I had to tug at it to loosen it. The envelope ripped.

This attracted the attentions of both my abductor and his snake. They turned to look down at me, their heads swiveling in unison.

"A little restless, are we?" he inquired lazily.

I could hear movement in the scorpion cage so near my left ear, but I dared not look. At least not toward the cage. I decided to take a leaf out of the snake's repertoire and looked its master squarely in the eye. Locking into his gaze, I swayed my right shoulder in a softly suggestive sinuous movement. Then I purred, long and low.

His left eyebrow moved.

"Hmm," he murmured, low and slow in his response, "does my little car thief enjoy this?"

The air was hot and heavy and reeked of jet fuel. The warehouse, located right underneath the flight path of the planes coming in to land at the Naples airport, was smelly, noisy, and isolated. Nobody else wanted this location, only warehouses. So we were alone on a back lane behind Mercantile Road. Not a person in sight.

He stroked the neck of his snake.

In the distance, through the heat and insects, the sounds of vehicles traveling on Mercantile taunted me; so many citizens nearby and yet no one could see me in my current predicament. Mind you, the remoteness of the area from public view was one of the reasons I had selected the site to, shall we say, reallocate the ownership of his Jaguar. After all, when so lovely a car is parked in such a secluded place, well, who wouldn't be tempted? Still, I don't usually get caught.

The snake flicked its tongue. It focused on me. Even the added overhead roar of two small jets flying in low to the airport did not distract the serpent. It continued to stare at me.

It was time to take matters into my own hands.

The Jaguar's owner leaned forward, just a little, letting his snake coil down and around his arm toward me. There was something heavy in his shirt pocket; its weight made the green silk fabric droop. Keys?

I made purring noises again, and intensified my gaze.

Maintaining eye contact, he walked around the open trunk, lifted his Marlboro to his mouth, and inhaled deeply. "We have a lot in common," he said as he tossed my wallet on the ground. "We're both named Charlie." I could see from the look of his trousers that this attracted him.

"I prefer Charlotte," I whispered.

He leaned forward a bit and exhaled bluey smoke toward the scorpion and my hair. There was a response from the cage, a sort

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of shuffling noise, not agitated. Was it pleasure? How interesting, I thought, I seem to have encountered a man with an entourage of addicted pets.

Smiling slightly, he reached forward with his left index finger to tickle my nipple.

I smiled sweetly.

Never underestimate a woman on a mission.

Just as his finger was on the brink of making contact I took inspiration once again from the serpent. With lightning speed my leg uncoiled and my right stiletto shot forward toward his arm. In a moment's flash the heel pierced the snake, impaling it to its master's arm. A look of astonishment preceded the howl of pain that leapt from his mouth. He raised his arms wide, the shoe and the snake still dangling, and lunged toward me.

This was my chance.

With wrists together, my arms lashed forward. With a fierce jerk, the small wooden cage yanked upward. I aimed as best I could and saw the cage arc through the air and find its mark. It landed with a thunk on the back of his neck. The scorpion was not amused, and I saw the stinger emerge. My captor was stunned. Scorpions are not loyal. The stinger found soft flesh at the base of the skull. My captor screamed again, his body writhing in agony. He fell forward into the trunk. His silk pocket emptied onto my abdomen. And hallelujah, keys fell out.

A man in pain is a piece of cake.

Five minutes later I was out of the trunk, out of the cuffs, and as my foot hit the Jaguar's accelerator I noticed in the rearview mirror that Charlie was twitching on the ground beside the warehouse. The wriggling snake and my shoe were still attached to his arm. "So, Charlie," I sang through the sunroof, "is your ecosystem experiencing a change in its momentum?"

A scorching red and turquoise sunset was taking shape in the western sky, an unsettling omen. What were the gods forewarning? Would there be passion and intrigue? Suggestions of violence? In spite of the hot June wind in my hair, a tingle shot down my spine.

The torn manilla envelope lay on the seat beside me. And, irritated by the loss of my shoe, I had also taken Charlie's wallet, his passport, his appointment book, my wallet, and my folding money.

The manilla envelope indicated, in the upper left corner, that it originated from a Naples hotel, the Ritz Carlton, an address not to be sneezed at. Inside, a cover letter was signed "Charlie Parker." The driver's license and credit cards, contained by the wallet, matched. Charlie Parker? Give me a break. The original Charlie Parker, one of the greatest jazz musicians who ever lived, must be rolling over in his grave to have a sleaze like this using the same name.

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But hold on, there was some very interesting material in this envelope. Glossy photographs slid out, one of a large snake, another of a giraffe; others had a pair of gazelles, a panda bear, and a polar bear. A sheet of statistics, including several series of numbers, accompanied each photograph. Was Charlie, besides being a creep, a wildlife expert?

That was all very well, but I needed a new pair of shoes. At this point I was at the corner of Pine Ridge and the Tamiami Trail, within sight of the luxurious Waterside Shops, including a Saks Fifth Ave. I looked at my watch and realized, happily, that Waterside was still open. They certainly carried shoes. And Charlie Parker, left trembling somewhere off Mercantile Road, owed me a pair. It was most reassuring that his wallet fit so conveniently into my handbag. He had a platinum American Express card with an unlimited credit line. Off I went.

An hour and a bit later I walked up to the check-in desk at the Ritz in my new stilettos, took off my new Dior sunglasses, and looked the attendant right in the eye.

"Yes?" he inquired. His discreet brass nameplate read: "Quentin."

"Mrs. Parker," I said, flashing my new vintage Tiffany wedding ring. "My husband said that a key would be waiting for me here at the desk."

"Oh?" Quentin replied, appearing a bit perplexed. "Mr. Parker did not mention that his wife would be meeting him here. But perhaps he mentioned it to the concierge. Just a moment, please," and he slid away silently in his crepe-soled shoes. It is such a shame about crepe-soled shoes, a most unfortunate byproduct of the modern age.

I adjusted my new diamond earrings while he went to consult. It seemed to be taking a few minutes, so I pulled out Parker's appointment book and flipped through it. Well, well, he had an appointment for nine o'clock this evening in the lobby bar of the hotel, but with whom? There was no name. I could feel a smile erupting on my face. It might be kind of fun to show up in his place. Who knew what might happen? And besides, wasn't it time for a little break, time to consider other options, find new possibilities?

Quentin returned after what seemed a long time. Were they going to deny me access to Parker's room? I leaned over the counter and allowed my décolletage to display itself to him. I stroked my neck.

He cleared his throat. "Apparently Mr. Parker did say that he was meeting someone and to send that person to the bar near the piano at nine P.M." He let his eyes drift upward toward my chin.

"Thank you," I whispered, and held out my hand.

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He blinked and tentatively reached out his hand toward mine.

"The keys," I reminded him, and smiled.

Quentin's throat and face reddened instantly with deep crimson blotches. He cleared his throat again and turned, reaching into a drawer for a key card. He also had a set of car keys, which he handed to me, eyes lowered.

"Here you are, Mrs. Parker," he squeaked. "Suite Seven-twelve. Your husband left his car keys here at the desk. Perhaps you could give them to him."

"Thank you so much," I said, trying not to appear surprised. Car keys? What about the car I was just driving? I turned and walked toward the elevators, looking closely at these new car keys. There was a little polar bear attached to the ring. But these were not for a car; they were for a Chevy van. So Charlie Parker had two vehicles, a Jaguar and a van. Curiouser and curiouser.

But I couldn't waste time worrying about cars. My new diamond Rolex indicated I only had twenty minutes to pull myself together and get to the piano in the bar by nine. And, because of Charlie's cryptic style of writing down his appointments, I didn't have the faintest idea who would be waiting there. This called for some fast thinking. Hastily, I slid the papers out from the manilla envelope and read as much as I could as the elevator hushed upwards. One of the items inside the envelope was a copy of *World Wildlife Magazine.*

By nine I was in the lobby bar reading the wildlife journal, positioned in an armchair chosen for its vantage point; everyone entering or exiting strolled past my seat. The slow jazzy tones of the piano and saxophone duet floated outward. Ironically, they were playing an old Charlie Parker number, "Bird of Paradise." Recorded in 1951, it was an old favorite of my father's. A wave of nostalgia washed over me and I had a little memory flash of my childhood and my dad, who used to listen to Parker as he tousled my hair and taught me the fundamentals of B and E and car theft. I remember him hugging me warmly.

"Always have something to fall back on," he said, "and always keep your eyes on the lookout."

I took his advice and began people-watching, which, in the bar of the Ritz Carlton, is a worthwhile endeavor. At the next table was a well-known American television star notable for his adventures in rehab. Two adoring young women attended him. And just leaving the bar were two men who frequently appeared on the society pages of Florida's journals and newspapers. The large rotund man on the left was M. Gérard, a wealthy local impresario, owner of Restaurant Gérard, who was as famous for the live jazz performances at his upscale establishment as for the dining experience

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itself. The long-legged man walking beside him was his celebrated chef, Jacques, who, considering his profession, was oddly thin. As they left the bar they were deeply involved in their conversation.

I looked at my watch; Parker's appointment was late. I drummed my fingers on the table.

At nine-seventeen a tallish, good-looking man, about forty, in an Armani suit and polished loafers, hurried into the bar and began scanning the room. He reminded me of the actor Robert Mitchum. His briefcase was largish and of very handsome black leather, polished to a sheen that almost seemed reflective. It was probably Florentine. This was the man I was looking for.

He chose a seat next to a tall window. Good choice, I thought, we can talk easily there. I got up from my seat and strolled slowly towards him.

"I'm so sorry I'm a bit late," I said, extending my hand. "I hope you haven't been waiting for too long."

He looked up, a bit puzzled.

I sat down and crossed my legs, allowing my short red skirt to ride up a bit. "I'm Charlotte Parker," I said. "I believe you were to meet Charlie, but he's been detained and I hope you don't mind if I join you instead."

"Uh, certainly," he replied, standing to be polite, and then sitting down again. "This is a bit unexpected. I had no idea he was married." He shook his head and subtly gave me the once-over. "This is really quite a surprise."

I laughed softly, but I was stalling and so was he. He hadn't introduced himself and I had no idea how to address him. Nor did I have any idea why he was here. Parker deserved a kick in the pants, I thought; why was important information missing from his appointment book? I raised my hand to call for martinis.

It was also time to discover my handsome companion's name.

"Do you have a business card?" I asked casually. "It is always nice to have fax numbers and e-mail addresses."

He looked at me for a moment, then reached into his inner jacket pocket. "You don't know who I am," he said.

I lowered my head and let my hair fall forward, always a useful tactic to hide one's facial expression when the unexpected occurs.

"I don't mind," he said, "but it raises a few interesting questions."

As our martinis arrived I tried not to appear too anxious to reach for mine. It had been a busy day.

"It's true," I said quietly, and with a slow, calm voice. "Charlie left in a hurry this morning and isn't back yet. I knew he had an appointment and I thought it would be rude to leave a visitor without attention." I stood up and reached for my handbag. "If you prefer, you can wait for him by yourself."

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He let out a short laugh and stood up. "Not at all, please, do sit down. I think we have a lot to discuss." With that he handed me his card. "Allow me to introduce myself, Mrs. Parker," he said. "Miles Davis."

This was ridiculous. I thought "Charlie Parker" was a coincidence, but now twice in one day I had met men who had names identical to prominent jazz artists. What on earth was the connection between the two of them? Did it have to do with music? Or perhaps musicians?

"Are you going to talk to me about the sale?" he asked, completely out of the blue.

"Me?" I replied, pulling my skirt down. "I'm not for sale."

"Interesting reply," he responded with a little knowing smile, "considering the adventurous tastes of our clients." He chortled. "And their deep alligator wallets." He patted his lovely briefcase and slid it toward me. "Benny Goodman is thrilled."

I took a sip of my martini. This was a wild turn of events. Another deceased jazz artist. And a fat briefcase that had just been handed to me. Obviously Charlie had sold something that Davis had purchased, and wealthy clients were involved, but I could not imagine what the commodity might be. For obvious reasons, it couldn't be dead jazz musicians.

I had to think quickly. My instincts wanted me to grab the briefcase and run, but this would alert Miles Davis, or whoever he was, to the fact that there was a problem. Actually, there were a whole lot of problems, including the detail that at least four people were having an identity crisis, including myself and the man sitting opposite me. And this didn't include bodies lying around warehouses, car theft, false impersonation, or misuse of credit cards.

"I'll deliver this to Charlie," I responded, reaching for the briefcase as slowly as possible. "I'm afraid we had a disagreement this afternoon."

"I thought you said he left this morning," Davis replied, "and had not yet returned."

"Our altercation was by telephone," I improvised. "He phoned from somewhere between Miami and Naples."

Davis leaned forward in his chair. He looked suspicious. "Where exactly do you fit into this?" he asked.

"Oh, like your clients, there is an adventurous side to me," I replied, taking another sip and looking at my watch.

He looked at his own watch. "Do you have the keys?" he asked.

I let my hair fall forward again and kept my eyes lowered. Keys? What keys?

Miles Davis was getting impatient. I tried smiling alluringly at him, but this time it did no good. And then I saw him reach across to me. He grabbed my purse!

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I jumped up out of my chair. He emptied my purse on the table. There was a clatter. Sunglasses, wallets, sets of keys, Davis's business card, a comb, it all came tumbling out. People at other tables were looking at us. Then he slowed down and calmly selected a set of keys. He chose the keys with the polar bear. The keys for the Chevy van.

Too strange.

"I really must go," I said. "May I telephone you in the morning? Perhaps Charlie will talk to you then." Not bothering to wait for a reply, I swept the things from the table into my purse, scooped up the briefcase, and turned to leave. I'd better not seem too anxious. "Thank you so much, the martini was superb." With that I turned and walked as slowly as I could out the doors and toward the elevators.

Did he buy it? Was he still suspicious?

As the elevator doors closed I saw him walking quickly toward me. He was following. He knew. Keeping panic in check, I pressed Parker's floor number, but got out one floor ahead. And boy, did I get lucky. A middle-aged couple, all dressed up, were leaving their room hurriedly. The doors at the Ritz are heavy and slow to close. As the couple walked away I slipped behind them into their room. The door snicked shut behind me and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Obviously I could not now return to Charlie's room. But first I had to open the briefcase and see what was inside.

Money. Lots of it. Cash. And an itemized list written on stationery with letterhead which said "Ecosystems Inc." There was a logo, too. I felt my eyes narrow. It was a polar bear. And the address in the corner was for the warehouse off Mercantile Road.

The list consisted of many of the same wildlife that I had seen in the photos from Charlie's manilla envelope, but some had been checked off. The giraffe and the gazelles had check marks. So did the boa constrictor and the polar bear. Beside the word "panda" was a scribbled "NA." That usually meant "not available."

Just a minute. Did this mean Charlie was dealing in the exotic-animal trade? Endangered species? Had he and Miles Davis just conducted a business transaction involving these animals? But who would buy such wildlife? The Miami Zoo? Michael Jackson? And wasn't this highly illegal?

I slammed the briefcase shut. It was time to get out of here.

As I headed for the door I realized that it would be difficult to run, if I had to, in these stilettos. It was time to improvise. The woman who occupied this room likely had comfortable walking shoes. Sure enough, the closet revealed several pairs from which to choose. I laughed to myself as I slipped on a hideous pair of crepe-soled shoes. I snapped open the briefcase, plucked two one-hundred-dollar bills from the stack, and left them on the closet

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floor where the shoes had been. I wished I could see her face when she discovered this later.

The Jaguar purred as it headed down Mercantile Road. My Rolex told me that I had an hour until I had to be at the Naples airport, lots of time to drive past the warehouse and see if Charlie was still lying on the ground. As I got near the warehouse I turned the headlights off and drove very slowly. There seemed to be a lot of activity going on. I could see a Chevy van backed up to the loading dock with the rear doors spread open. Oh yes, I thought, Miles Davis must be here.

I inched forward and slid into a dark unlit area, away from the lights of the warehouses. The building with all the activity was certainly tall enough to house a giraffe or two. What do they feed them? I wondered as the car glided to a silent stop. I could see a back door, painted white, at the top of some steps. Aha, the door was propped open.

I tiptoed up the steps and in through the open door, happy for the silent crepe-soled shoes. There were voices coming from the other side of a tan stack of boxes. I moved into the room as far as the boxes would let me.

"But you see, I cannot help it," said a male voice with a French accent. There was a pause, then the same voice spoke again. "*Oui,* they wanted a boa, but you must make the best of it with a python."

Python?! I looked carefully around my feet. No sign of any large snakes, but I had a shiver anyway.

"And the polar bear, she is small. . . . *Oui,* I know they have, how you say, paid up front for this. . . ."

Why would customers complain? Wouldn't a small polar bear be cuter than a large one? And where was the polar bear anyway? I peeked around a stack of crates. There was no sign of any animals at all. But I caught a quick glance of a largish man speaking on a cell phone. He looked familiar; he was turning his profile my way.

I knew who he was! He was M. Gérard, the rich impresario I'd seen in the bar. What was he doing here? Could he be Benny Goodman?

"And, surprise, we have an unexpected arrival," he continued. He now walked toward the van, turning his back to me. "You are not going to believe this, but Charlie got for you four Ribbon-Tailed Birds of Paradise."

I inched a little further into the room to get a better look.

"*Oui . . . oui,* I knew you would like that." He laughed, walking towards the loading dock. "They are from New Guinea.

"And Jacques," Gérard continued, "Charlie, he is going to be okay."

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My fingers flew to my lips. He would?

"Absolutely, yes, he is still in the emergency room. Madame la doctor, she say Charlie has much pain, but he will make it."

Miles Davis and the other men were lugging something.

"Davis, he made the exchange with Madame Parker, the wife of Charlie," Gérard continued with a small laugh. "Ah, *oui,* who would have guessed? And he got you your giraffe, she is right here," and he pointed to one of the sealed plastic bags. "All ready for Friday."

I took a step back.

Oh no.

They weren't just trading in extremely rare animals, they were butchering them. This warehouse was obviously their distribution center. And M. Gérard was speaking to Jacques, his chef. I reeled with what I had just discovered. This meant that Jacques was cooking endangered species procured by Charlie, and customers were dining on them. On Friday. Obviously the diners were the adventurous clients with deep alligator wallets.

Perverts.

In less than a minute I was backing the Jaguar as silently as I could from its dark hiding spot. A large rotund figure appeared in the doorway. He had a cell phone. It was Gérard. He raised an arm and began shouting. Thank goodness for my background in automobile ownership reallocation; it gives a driver cool nerves when leaving a site under duress.

A piña colada on a beach of the Cayman Islands is a lovely way to watch a sunset, particularly while reading the *International Herald Tribune.* And such an interesting photograph on the front page. All three of them—Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Benny Goodman—handcuffed and surrounded by scowling policemen. On the inside pages an outraged lead editorial indicated that, after an anonymous tip, Interpol was arriving imminently to investigate Ecosystems Inc. All the lawyers were quoted as saying, "No comment."

Apparently the money from the lucrative venture has vanished, not a trace of it anywhere.

As a blazing orange and violet tropical sunset was taking shape in the western sky and the sun began dipping toward the Caribbean Sea, a warm ocean breeze rustled the palms. Was this another omen for the future? Ah yes, I thought, and raised my hand to order another piña colada. ●

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Pearl McGuire's Plaything

by Peter Turnbull

Realism is the key to a Peter Turnbull story whether he's writing about the Glasgow in which he worked as a social worker for two decades or of his native Yorkshire. There isn't much classical detection in the tales, but that's because he's trying to re-create as faithfully as possible the manner in which police work is actually done—often by teamwork and through routine questioning. The characters in the stories are unforgettable. ¶

Ray Sussock didn't like the house. It wasn't that it gave him a bad feeling as if it was haunted, it was nothing like that, it was more that he didn't like what the building said about the personality who had had it built and who lived in it. At first he did like it, then he didn't, then he did, then after a few more swithering moments he finally and permanently came down on the side of not liking it, his opinion on the matter by then being firmly rooted. It wasn't so much the building, he decided; it was the location. Here, where the road off the Campsies forked into a Y, or like the forked tongue of a snake, the building had been built so that the traffic drove towards it and then diverged at either side of it. He felt that the bungalow shouldn't have been built there at all and the greenfield site left as a greenfield site, for grazing cattle, meadowlarks, and natterjack toads. But it had been built there, where a country road divides, on a promontory overlooking Drumchapel and the extreme west end of Glasgow, with no other buildings close-by, and it said, "Look at me. . . . Look at me. . . . Look at me. . . ." The road, or the roads, about the bungalow didn't even have pavements: They didn't need them; nothing—no shop, no pub—was in walking distance. The residents of the bungalow were totally dependent on motorcars for transport, specifically, surmised Sussock, the pink

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Cadillac standing in the drive. No doubt, he thought, its mate would be concealed in the double garage beside the bungalow. He felt that there was nothing wrong with the design. If it had been built in a fold of the hills, with just the red tiles of its roof visible, with perhaps a wisp of homely smoke rising from its chimney, then perhaps it would have been a pleasant, a very pleasant house indeed. All this Sussock took in as he turned his ancient Ford into the driveway and halted in back of the area car with its flashing blue light. He stepped out into the warm sunlight, which served to remind him that September is really a summer month, yet the last of the year, and the dread days of winter when the thin air knifed his chest would shortly be upon him. He walked past the black, windowless mortuary van toward the house where a solemn-faced constable stood by the door and nodded to Sussock as he entered the bungalow.

Sussock found the interior of the house to be similar to the exterior: brash, showy, superficial, with no sense of the household having evolved over time. It even smelled new. A flash of a camera bulb attracted Sussock to the living room of the house. He walked into the room and saw Richard King standing beside the wall. The chubby, bearded detective constable, always smartly dressed, looking older than his mid twenties, always served to make Sussock feel his own advanced age and his shabby dress. In the middle of the floor lay a middle-aged woman who, to Sussock's unqualified but experienced eye, was quite, quite dead.

"Glad you could make it, Sarge." King smiled at Sussock.

"Richard." Sussock nodded towards King. "So this is she?"

"This is she, sir." King consulted his notebook. "Believed to be one Pearl McGuire, aged fifty-eight or -nine . . . the police surgeon confirmed death about an hour ago, at 09:32 A.M., sir. Much blood about the hair and the back of her head, as you can see."

"Aye . . ." Sussock glanced at the blackened mess on the white hair, which extended onto the deep pile of the carpet.

"Last seen alive, so far as we can tell, at ten-thirty A.M. on Saturday . . . forty-eight hours ago. . . . The police surgeon wouldn't commit himself."

"You do surprise me." Sussock grinned.

"Yes . . ." King shared the joke, "but he thinks death occurred about twenty-four hours ago. During the day or evening, day clothing as you can see."

"Yes. . . . Not a nighttime murder, it would seem."

"No, Sarge. No sign of a break-in."

"Intriguing."

"The door was locked when we arrived."

"A locked-room mystery," Sussock beamed.

"Not really that intriguing," King said calmly, matter-of-factly.

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"The whole thing looks as though the perpetrator was known to the lady. No violence apart from the injuries, no sign of a fight, I mean; no forced entry . . . calm before the assault. . . . It speaks for the lady letting someone in the house, or living with someone who attacked her from behind and then left the premises, locking the door behind him, or someone with a set of keys."

"Alarm?"

"No alarm. Just good old-fashioned locks, good solid mortice locks everywhere, and locks on the windows. No dogs, either. Just locks."

"So, Pearl McGuire—what do we know about her?"

"Very little as yet, Sarge."

"Who found her?"

"Her son. He's sitting in the area car. One of the constables is with him."

"Quizzed him?"

"Not yet, Sarge."

"You've contacted the pathologist?"

"Yes, Sarge. He's on his way."

The flashbulb popped again. Sussock glanced at the Scene of Crime officer dusting for fingerprints. "Anything?"

"Yes, Sarge." King smiled. "One lovely, lovely print. I'll show you."

King led Sussock through the bungalow, down a corridor to the bathroom. On the tiles beside the toilet was a smudge of blood, unmistakably blood, in which, visible to the naked eye, was a fingerprint. A full, bold fingerprint. "It's been photographed and lifted," King said proudly. "There's traces of vomit under the rim of the toilet, and if that blood proves to be the blood of the victim, then that print was made by the murderer. In all other areas of the house, the indications are that the murderer wore gloves."

"What are you inferring?"

"That once the deed was committed, the perpetrator, with blood-stained gloves, became upset, went to the bathroom and vomited, possibly leaning against the wall whilst doing so . . . hence the blood, and then briefly removed the gloves to clean up and clean himself, or herself. Can't really wipe your mouth with gloves covered in someone else's blood."

"I'll buy that."

"And in a brief moment of forgetfulness, leaned against the wall, putting a fingerprint in the blood."

"Makes sense." Sussock nodded. "Makes very good sense, Richard. Tell you what, we keep this up our sleeve."

"You think so, Sarge?"

"We don't want to tip people off."

"Very good."

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"Right, I'll go and have a chat with the son. His name is . . . ?"

"Boyd. Tam Boyd."

"Her son's name is Boyd?"

"She remarried."

"I see." Sussock left the house and walked down the gravel drive to the area car. He was happy to be out of the house because, as well as disliking its location, he also sensed a heavy, oppressive atmosphere which seemed to be latent in the building. It hadn't, he felt, been a happy house. He bent down by the rear door of the area car and spoke to the thin-featured young man in the rear seat who sat nervously drawing on a cigarette. "Mr. Boyd?"

"Aye?"

"DS Sussock." Sussock sat in the front seat, steeling himself for the pain in his chest which he knew would be caused by Boyd's cigarette. He had once been a smoker; the legacy was catching up with him.

"DS?"

"Detective Sergeant."

"Oh."

"I understand the deceased lady is your mother?"

"Aye." Sussock thought him sullen, possibly shocked, as any man would be in such circumstances.

"Can you tell us what happened?"

"That's your job."

"All right . . . what I mean is, how was it that you found the body?"

"I took a hike up to her house. She wasn't answering the phone, I knew she was at home, she's never anywhere else in the mornings. She didn't answer the door . . . went round the back, onto the patio, glanced through the window and there she was . . . saw the blood on her hair. . . . Dialled nine-nine-nine from the phone box in the village."

"You didn't go into the house?"

"I knew she was dead . . . her arms being raised up—rigor mortis." He tossed the cigarette out of the window. "I watch cop shows. I watch a lot of cop shows. We've got satellite TV. If you're unemployed, all you can do is watch TV and we've got forty-eight channels to choose from."

"You don't seem upset."

"I'm not. She was a tight-fisted cow . . . and not a good parent."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, well . . . to let you understand: My dad walked out on us when I was three and my wee brother was two, and she made us pay for his crime as we grew up. Everything that went wrong was our fault, y' ken the sketch. We grew up in Drumchapel, we're still there. . . ."

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"Still there. And your mother lived in a house like this?"

"Won the lottery, didn't she. There's no justice. No justice at all. Left us in the scheme and came here. Over a million pounds she won. She had this built, the house that Pearl built . . . so we could see it, her sons and her neighbours; just look up and there's Pearl Boyd's bungalow for all the world to see, and her pink Cadillac. . . . She can't drive but she bought a pink Caddie and kept it parked in the drive. It's the only car . . . there's a wee van in the garage they use to fetch the shopping."

"She didn't give you any money to get you out of the scheme?" But Boyd just looked at Sussock.

"All right. You said 'they.' A van 'they' used to get the shopping."

"She got married. She married a man my age, younger—Scott McGuire. More show, you see—from the scheme. A long time by herself, then a big new house, a pink Cadillac, and a nice young plaything for those long Scottish winters."

"And you called on her when her phone wasn't answered?"

"Aye . . . well, blood is thicker than water and she was good for a wee tap, twenty quid here . . . a tenner there . . . nothing to her but it made all the difference to me. So I walked up. I thought that if I showed some concern I might get a few quid. What I found . . . well . . . then I called you guys."

"Pleased that you didn't go into the house. It would have contaminated the crime scene."

"Aye . . . it didn't scratch the surface."

"Sorry?"

"This house, the Caddie, the clothes, all the furnishings, all those holidays—it just didn't scratch the surface of what she won. Now he gets it . . . McGuire . . . her toyboy . . . her plaything . . . all that money. Me and my brother will see nothing of it now. It's just come to me that he'll get the lot."

"So, do you know where he is?"

"McGuire? Naw . . . he's always away for a day at a time, getting himself lifted."

"We know him?"

"Very well. Breaches."

"That's enough." Sussock reached forward and picked up the radio microphone. He pressed the Send button. "Criminal records," he said. Then he turned to Boyd and asked, "Do you know McGuire's numbers?"

"I don't. He's about twenty-two and his birthday is in July."

"Good enough." Then into the microphone Sussock said, "Ref Scott McGuire, aged twenty-two years, July birthdate." His request was acknowledged and Sussock replaced the microphone.

"When did you last see your mother?"

"Seven or eight days ago. I last spoke to her on Saturday night.

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Phoned her for a loan of money. She said she'd sleep on it. All I wanted was twenty quid but she said she'd sleep on it and to phone back on Monday. Today. So I phoned. She didn't answer, so I walked up to her house. . . . It got me away from the wife . . . she's nipping my head."

"Aye. . . ." A difficult life was something Sussock had known only too well. His little bedsit was far preferable to sharing his own bungalow with a screeching wife. "Did your mother have enemies?"

Boyd pursed his lips. "She didn't have many friends, but actual enemies . . . someone who would want to murder her, I don't know of anyone who'd fit that bill. There'll not be too many broken hearts at the news that Pearl has got herself filled in. She up here, looking down on us surviving on welfare in Drumchapel. . . . She being one of us for all those years . . . and then she wins the lottery and not even her sons smell the money. She hasn't many friends, but as to actual enemies, nobody that I'd know would want to fill her in."

"I see. So where were you in the last forty-eight hours?"

"So, I'm a suspect, aye?"

"Yes. Everybody who knew her is a suspect; until we can eliminate them."

"T.I.E., isn't it? Trace, Interview, Eliminate. . . . I told you I watch police films."

"So, can we eliminate you?"

"Aye. I'm well alibied. Spent the weekend with the wife, children, and mates. My brother, he's got an even better alibi—he's in Spain at the moment, one of those last-minute cancellations."

"I see, well, we'll need to take your prints to eliminate them from the fingerprints in the house."

"You don't have to. They're on file . . . a few breaches. So are my brother's, and so's Scott McGuire's. A right parcel of rogues and no mistake."

"Ducked and dived a bit, then, have you?"

"Aye. It's all par for the course in Drumchapel."

"Useful anyway. Saves us some time."

Dr. Reynolds surveyed the body. He took a thermometer and noted the room temperature and the precise time that he took the reading. He turned to PC Wanless and asked him to find the central-heating thermostat and to report the time and temperature settings. Wanless left the room. Reynolds stood and said, "Well, she was murdered here . . . blood on the carpet. But I suppose you've worked that out for yourself."

"We managed that bit," King replied, smiling.

"Turned right down, sir." PC Wanless entered the room.

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"Good." Reynolds nodded his thanks. "That makes it easier to calculate the time of death . . . no fluctuations in temperature, except as dictated by nature."

"Cause of death, sir?"

"All in good time. Mr. King, is it?"

"Yes, sir. DC King."

"Good . . . know your boss, Donoghue. Good man. But all in good time. Really, only the P.M. can tell us how she died, but let's not ignore the obvious—the matted scalp hair. Clearly battered over the head with a blunt instrument. And here in the house, like I said, not killed elsewhere and dumped here. . . . So will you, or Mr. Sussock, whom I saw outside earlier, be at the post mortem?"

In the event, it was Richard King who represented the police at the post mortem into the death of Pearl McGuire, which, as usual, was held in the pathology department of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. The body of Pearl McGuire, naked save for a starched white towel draped over her coyly termed "private parts," lay on a stainless-steel table supported upon a single pedestal which also formed a drain to swallow any blood that might be released by a pathologist's scalpel. The mortuary assistant, Millard by name, King believed, was also in attendance and stood viewing the corpse with an unpleasant gleam in his eye which King had noticed on other occasions and which always disturbed him.

Reynolds took a scalpel and made an incision, totally encircled the skull above the ears, and then peeled the skin from the skull from back to front so that Pearl McGuire's face was covered with a fold of pink and red, and black and silver hair. "Blimey," said the tall, silver-haired pathologist. "He made sure of her all right. Would you like to have a look at this, Mr. King?"

King stepped forward from the corner of the room and peered at the top of Mrs. McGuire's skull, as revealed by Dr. Reynolds. "Crazy paving," he said.

"Is a neat way of putting it," Reynolds murmured, more to himself than in reply to King. "Note the linear pattern . . . multiple wounds, a long thin object, but strong . . . heavy . . . used with force, five, six, seven times. Making sure, as I said. A metal bar, I'd say, would be a likely murder weapon. No signs of other trauma . . . there's no sign of poison but I'll trawl for poisons anyway."

"We have a fingerprint in the blood, sir."

"Do you?" Reynolds beamed at King. "So you'll need DNA profiling of the lady's blood?"

"That's it, sir."

"All in good time, but your request is noted. Now, time of death . . . well, rigor is established. The body feels cold and is stiff so . . . death occurred between eight and thirty-six hours ago, but we'll narrow the time window down yet. The lady was quite slender and

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so she would have lost heat very quickly, though she was indoors and that would have assisted the body to retain heat. She was wearing day clothing . . . we have a rectal temperature taken at the murder site of twenty-three point four degrees Celsius. The room temperature was twenty degrees Celsius. . . . I'll have to look up my references, Mr. King, but think of fifteen to twenty hours ago for the approximate time of death . . . about midday, well, late morning on Sunday, yesterday. Let's see what her last meal was." Reynolds took up another longer, bladed scalpel and applied it to the stomach, and said for the benefit of the microphone hanging above the table, "I'm making a standard mid-line incision to access the stomach cavity." Then, to King, he said, "Take a deep breath, Mr. King."

King did so and stepped back from the table as Reynolds's scalpel penetrated Pearl McGuire's stomach cavity, releasing the gases therein with a hiss. He drew the scalpel over the stomach and parted the two folds of flesh. He began to fish out the contents of the stomach and place them on a tray. ". . . tomato skin, bacon . . . what can only be sausage meat . . . egg . . . toast . . . "

"Well, she'd had her Sunday breakfast, then," King offered.

"That would indeed be my observation, Mr. King. Helps pin down the time of death. . . . Not an early riser. . . . The digestion would be more advanced. I'd say she had just finished her brunch and was then despatched to the hereafter. Late A.M. yesterday. The fractured skull would have caused subdural haematoma. Blood contacting the brain tissue. Death is instantaneous. I'll look for poisons and I'll profile her DNA results to you as soon as."

There was something about the young man that Sussock didn't take to. He said, "You don't seem upset."

"I don't show my feelings," Scott McGuire replied. "So, I'm a widower. Some start to life, but I'll get by."

"We'll leave that aside, then." Sussock leant forward. "So, you were lifted on Friday?"

"Yes. Been in the poky since Friday. Up before the sheriff this afternoon. I'll plead guilty. Get it over with."

Sussock read from the sheet. "You got lifted for breach?"

"I'd had a wee drink."

"Theft by O.L.P." Sussock read from McGuire's list of p.c.'s . . . fraud. . . . "Fraud?"

"Benefit fraud. I was claiming Social Security while doing a wee job for cash in hand."

"I see . . . but nothing violent?"

"No. Not my style." He smiled but his eyes were cold.

"So what brought the breach on?"

"The drink."

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"But you've been drunk before."

"So?"

"Well, the point I'm getting at is that it's not like you to get violent in the drink."

"Just one too many, I reckon."

"So, tell me about you and your wife . . . your relationship, I mean."

"Pearl and I got on well."

"Not really the same age group, though."

"True love finds a way."

"So I'm told. How long had you been married?"

"About two years. Knew each other before, though."

"Then she got rich?"

"The lottery win. Well, someone has to win."

"Then you and she married?"

"Yes. She was a bit of a show-off. The house she built, the pink Cadillac . . . and me. . . . She liked to show me off. I was her plaything, she needed a handsome young husband to set off her new lifestyle."

"Being you?"

"I'm not complaining. I grew up in 'the drum.' I've had good living for two years . . . it's been nice. Would you complain?"

"Daresay you're a rich man now."

"Aye. . . ." McGuire nodded. "Confess that hadn't really occurred to me."

I bet it hadn't. But Sussock thought the words and kept his mouth shut. Firmly so. "So, your relationship?"

"Up and down. She drank like a fish, vodka being her tipple. . . . No hangover, you see."

"I know."

"But . . . it's all about tolerance. The good living, the holidays in the sun. She'd get angry when she was drunk . . . complaining that she envied me. I was young, I had her money . . . she felt old, she had none. She felt she should have had two million pounds when she was in her twenties. . . . But then, she had my muscular body in her sixties when other women of that age have nothing at all. . . . I reminded her of that."

"How do you see your future?"

"Without Pearl? I hadn't thought. It'll be difficult. I'll survive."

"I suppose she left all the money to you? That'll help."

"She told me I was the main whatnot."

"Beneficiary. Nice and secure future, then?"

"Looks like."

"Did you have many visitors to the house?"

"None. Pearl wanted it that way. She liked to show off outside, but indoors was her and her alone, and me as and when required."

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"That helps. We have an alien latent from the crime scene."

McGuire's face hardened. He looked worried.

"Most of the prints are yours and your wife's. Pearl had a record, too, you know . . . little things, but enough to know that her prints are on file. . . . And the murderer wore gloves."

McGuire smiled.

"Most of the time."

His face hardened again.

"There's one . . . not yours, not Pearl's . . . not gloved but a print, very fresh, so if you and Pearl didn't have visitors, then it means that once, just once, the murderer took his gloves off. So we'll likely get a result."

Sussock smiled inwardly. He enjoyed the colour draining from McGuire's face. The reference to the latent had clearly worried him. Sussock stood.

"Anyway, I'll leave you now, you'll be going up before the sheriff in a minute or two . . . but whatever sentence, you being in custody from Friday night until now means that you didn't murder your wife." McGuire smiled, but his smile was forced. Beneath he was a worried man, Sussock saw that very, very clearly.

Before Sussock left the Sheriff Court building, he went to the agent's room and found the two constables who had arrested Scott McGuire the previous Friday and who were shortly to give evidence for the Crown. He asked them about the incident.

"He was well warned," said the first officer. "We gave him all the chances but he just kept giving us grief, verbally, mainly. . . . Stopped short of actual violence but he just wouldn't hold his peace."

"Like he wanted to be arrested," said the second. "In the end we had no choice, so we lifted him."

"Once he was in the car he quietened down," added the first. "He was as good as gold."

"Like he'd got what he wanted," added the second.

"Interesting," said Sussock. "Very interesting."

At P Division police station in Charing Cross, Ray Sussock wrote up the case of Pearl McGuire (code 41) and left the building. It was three-thirty P.M. He signed out at the uniform bar and exchanged raised eyebrows with Elka Willems, she of Nordic looks and young enough to be his daughter, and drove his ancient Ford up to Queens Terrace in Hillhead, once the land of the wealthy, now the bedsit land of Scotland's premier city. He let himself into his room, just a bed, a table, a wardrobe, but it was better than being married to a woman he could not live with, or so he felt. He went down to Byres Road and sat in the library. Then he returned to his bed-

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sit and sat on the floor, watched his small black-and-white TV, which was similarly sitting on the floor. At ten P.M. he rose, washed, packed a change of clothes, and drove to Longside, to Baker Street, up a clean stair to a door with "Willems" on the nameplate. She opened it, embraced him as he stood on the threshold, hooked a slender finger under the knot of his tie, and tugged him into her flat.

In the experience of Ray Sussock, some cases were solved quickly, some only over time, and some were never solved. Some were solved by painstaking police work, and some solved themselves. The case of Pearl McGuire's murder was one Sussock felt solved itself.

September had given way to October, which began warm and dry but ended cold and wet. The cruelly thin air of winter which stabbed Sussock's chest came with November. In the city and in the shopping malls of the schemes, the Christmas decorations went up in early December, as did the number of arrests for drunkenness. Not because folk were celebrating Christmas, just the opposite, as Ray Sussock, sixty years of age, a failed marriage and a bedsit for a home, could well sympathise with: It's at Christmas that people most feel like failures and escape into drink. So that in a pub in the centre of town one Friday night, the Friday before Christmas, a young woman well in the drink broke a glass and pushed it into the face of the young man with whom she was sitting. The woman was called Melitta Munn, she was aged twenty years, and the man was called Scott McGuire. Melitta Munn stood indignantly over Scott McGuire as blood poured out of a long gash in his cheek and said, in the hearing of many, many people, "No, it's not. Not after what I did for you, it's not on." She then walked out of the pub, soon to be arrested and charged with causing severe injury, for Scott McGuire lost consciousness and later that night he lost his left eye.

One week later, on Christmas Eve, Ray Sussock once again returned to the ghastly, pretentious McGuire house, sitting where the two roads divide. He was accompanied by two constables.

"I'm dropping the charges," McGuire said, his eye still heavily bandaged. Melitta Munn walked silently up and stood beside him. "We've made things up."

In more ways than one, thought Sussock, but he said: "That's big-minded of you, saves the police and the court a lot of time. But that's not why we called. Can we come in?"

In the living room of the house, Sussock asked, "Can I ask the nature of your relationship?"

McGuire glanced at Melitta Munn and said, "We're lovers. We want to get married."

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"That's right," said Melitta Munn in a thin, piercing voice.

"I see. How long have you known each other?"

"Just since Pearl died."

"So, you never came into this house when Mrs. McGuire was alive?"

"No . . ." Scott McGuire said. "Melitta first came here about a month after Pearl died."

"Sure?"

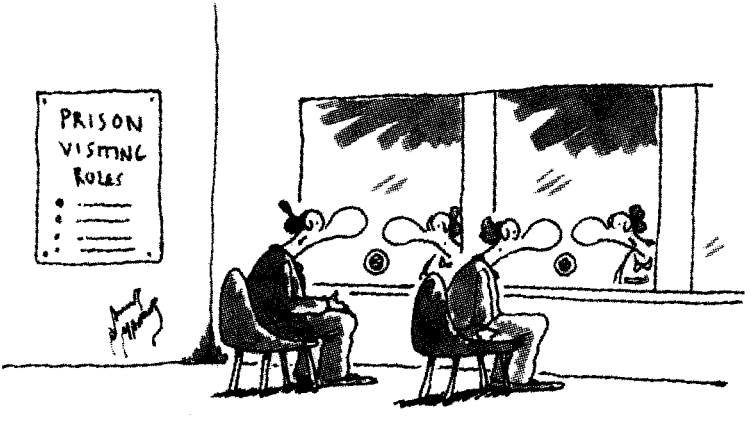
"Positive."

"I see. Well, you see, a number of things have come to light since the murder. . . . We got a DNA profile on the blood that was found in the bathroom. It was Pearl's blood, all right. Didn't get anywhere with the fingerprint, though. That was annoying because we found it actually in the bloodstain itself. It makes the fingerprint that of the murderer, since our Scene of Crime officer could tell us that there was only one pair of gloved hands."

"So?" McGuire had paled. Melitta Munn looked faint.

"We didn't get anywhere until Melitta obliged us by blinding you in your left eye. . . . We took her prints . . . screened them as is our procedure."

"I only took my gloves off the once," Melitta Munn appealed to McGuire, but by then he had sunk onto the settee with his head in his hands. ●



"I started to get suspicious when you asked if you could telecommute for the next two to four years."

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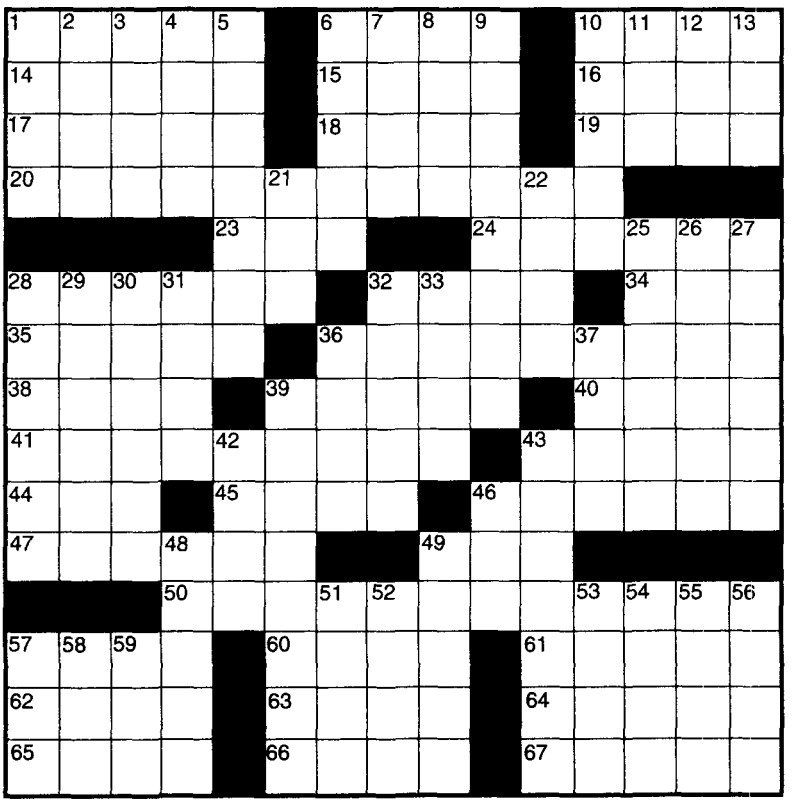
The Scene Is Edinburgh

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 142

ACROSS

1. Flies alone
6. Settings on an alarm clock
10. *Road* ____, Ruth Rendell
14. Stale
15. Whatever she wants she gets
16. October gem
17. Lofty residence
18. Actor Guinness
19. Ego
20. Bruised?
23. McBain's namesakes
24. Attack

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28. Harmony
32. ____-dieu
34. Child's game
35. Metric units
36. Solves the cases in 20 and 50 across
38. Actress Rowlands
39. Ms. Moody, author of the Cassandra Swann series, to her friends
40. Confident
41. Author of 20 and 50 across
43. Nurse, e.g.
44. Seventh letter in the Greek alphabet
45. Encounter
46. Dogs famous in mystery
47. Opening word
49. Popular pen
50. Fatal?
57. *Murder à la* ____, Patricia Moyes
60. Sea eagle
61. To Sherlock, "the lady"
62. Presently
63. Ceremony
64. John ____ Garner, VP 1933-1941
65. Part of 59 Down
66. Tore
67. Church officer

DOWN

1. *A* ____ *in the Dark,* Lawrence Block
2. Pitcher Hershiser
3. Modena money
4. Auricular
5. Those searching
6. Robinson's Banks, Granger's Markby, and Tey's Grant
7. Fungus
8. Freshman cadet
9. Shirley, star of Hitchcock's *The Trouble With Harry*
10. *Blood Red* ____, Margaret Lawrence
11. *The* ____ *Who Guards the Balance,* Elizabeth Peters
12. My ____ Sal
13. Extra in *Midsummer Night's Dream*
21. Total
22. Addict
25. Hair color
26. Accustomed
27. In a baseball game they come in second
28. Texas A&M team
29. Produce
30. Some lilies
31. Tent maker
32. Suggest
33. Nasal combining form
36. Kind of box
37. Jacob's brother
39. Scorners
42. Found in an armory
43. C17H21NO4
46. _____, haec, hoc
48. Correct
49. Wounds do this
51. Stumble
52. Begin play
53. Russian river
54. Button on a cell phone
55. Follows depend and differ
56. Prophet
57. Sore
58. _____ *for the Money,* Janet Evanovich
59. 1949 film starring Edmund O'Brien

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Art by Allen Davis

THE FIREBIRD'S FEATHER

by James Powell

In 1875, when Ambrose Ganelon, the founder of San Sebastiano's famous detective agency, arrived in St. Petersburg to be inducted into the Imperial Society of Amateur Woodwind Virtuosi, he was surprised by the depth of his distaste for the Russian winter and how badly the city's dreary gray sky above roofs of cucumber green compared with the Mediterranean blue and terra cotta of home. He was happy when the time came to return to his principality in the south of France.

On the eve of his departure, a snowy afternoon in early December, he and his bodyguard Sergeant Lucas, riding in an open droshky with netting to protect them from the snow kicked up by the horse's hooves, arrived at a shop well off the Nevsky Prospekt. Reluctantly Ganelon cast off the buffalo robe and hurried inside. The watchful Lucas followed closely, for Ganelon's nemesis, the evil Eurasian genius Dr. Ludwig Fong, had recently put a bounty on the detective's head.

The two men entered the shop with much stamping of felt-lined boots, intended both to restore the circulation in their feet and

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announce their arrival. Then Ganelon approached the counter topped by an iron grille with a small open window. He rapped loudly on the counter. At last from deep within the shop a withered old man in a wheeled chair appeared, pushing himself forward with two canes and muttering in Russian as he came.

Ganelon handed a letter of introduction through the window. While the old man read its contents the detective mused on the odd circumstance which had brought him to this out-of-the-way shop. Back in San Sebastiano he had been approached by Gregory Soutine, the wealthy champagne merchant. In Russia, Soutine's family had belonged to a sect of Old Believers called the Bonapartiski who held that the French emperor was the Messiah and so prayed for the success of his invasion. They had fled Russia with the retreating French army to escape persecution by a rival sect who considered Napoleon the Antichrist, the personification of Apollyon, the Angel of the Pit.

James Powell often sends notes about his stories. Of this one he writes: "There was in fact a religious sect in Russia which thought Napoleon to be the Messiah. I think they were called the Bonapartiski. As for those who thought him to be the Angel of the Pit, that can be found in Buber's *Tales of the Hassidic Fathers*. I don't remember who it was who said a woman who was not pretty has never been young, but in the library book in which I read it, 'how true' had been pencilled in the margin." †

Apprenticed as a child to a wine merchant in the Moselle region, Soutine had risen in the business by dint of intelligence and hard work. Some thirty years before, he moved his operations to San Sebastiano, where his wife had been born, and became active in the principality's sizable Russian émigré community. By that time he was exporting champagne to the Russian market at a rate surpassed only by the Clicquot establishment.

Would Ganelon, Soutine asked, oblige him by bringing back a package from St. Petersburg? It was, the champagne merchant said with a smile, a Christmas present he was giving to himself. Why the package could not be delivered more conventionally or why Soutine had not picked it up himself on one of his frequent business trips to Russia, he did not say.

But Ganelon could hardly refuse. Two years before at the Battle of El Skadiwah, Madame Soutine's nephew Eric, an officer in San Sebastiano's butterflies of war, the Tripoline Lancers, rode out under enemy fire to rescue Ganelon's son, a fellow officer, who had been shot from his horse. In fact, Ganelon was doubly in the Soutines' debt, for when he recovered from his wound, Fiston, as

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Ganelon liked to call his son, retired from the Lancers and enrolled at the University of Heidelberg, vowing to bring scientific method to the family detective agency.

The shopkeeper looked up from the letter. He examined Ganelon through eyes undimmed by age before asking in perfect French if he was addressing—here he consulted the letter again—Ambrose Ganelon?

Ganelon was accustomed to people recognizing his name. But he held back a scowl. Prince Feinhart had warned him to soften his manner on the Russian trip lest he offend the Tsar and his people. "Remember, Ambrose," he had said, "our military is not yet ready to take on the Russian Empire." Ganelon had cocked an eyebrow, hoping the "not yet" was an example of the prince's dry humor.

At Ganelon's nod the old shopkeeper reached down and with much rattling of keys opened a strongbox beneath the counter and drew out a flat box about four inches square, enameled in gold, silver, green, and black. He displayed the box, holding it by two corners between thumb and forefinger like a magician about to demonstrate the hand is quicker than the eye. "A much sought-after thing," he said. "I am surprised Monsieur Soutine left it with me so long. Tell him I could have sold it ten times over. At double the price." As the shopkeeper spoke he wrapped the box carefully in heavy brown paper and tied it up with string.

"Witness that I give you the box in a closed state," he added, handing the package out through the window. "If it is opened before it reaches Monsieur Soutine, then all my searching and all his money will have been for naught." Abruptly the old man pushed his chair away from the counter with his canes, spun himself around, and vanished back into the depths of the shop.

Frowning, Ganelon slipped the package into his pocket, buttoned up his overcoat, buried his hands in ample mittens, and nodded at Sergeant Lucas. The policeman opened the door and looked left and right before stepping aside to let Ganelon lead the way back out into the weather.

Ganelon showed the droshky-man the next address on his list, for he still had some farewells to make in the city. Then, to keep his mind from the numbing cold, he speculated on the contents of the box. He hoped it contained a religious relic of some kind. But these were troubled times. It might just as well be the prototype of a hair-triggered anarchist explosive device or some wild political manifesto.

The detective and his bodyguard returned to their suite at the Hotel du Nord not long after dinner. As Lucas took up his place on a chair near the door, Ganelon sat down at the writing table and drew out the mysterious package, holding it in the palm of his

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hand. After a moment he lifted the package up by one end of the knot. It turned in the air for a moment. Then the knot came undone, the package dropped back onto his palm, and the wrapping paper opened like a flower.

The box had no visible keyhole beneath the lid and, fearful that it might open or be detonated by a spring hidden in the elaborate enameling, Ganelon held the box up by two corners between thumb and forefinger as the shopkeeper had done.

The lid represented an exotic long-tailed bird with feathers of gold and silver and a crystal eye. The sides were decorated with a silver tree hung with golden apples, a handsome prince riding a gray wolf, a beautiful princess, and a horse with a golden mane. And on each corner a green face peered out from vines and leaves.

Someone knocked. Without looking up Ganelon heard Lucas open the door and then the squeaking cart as the samovar of hot water and bottles were wheeled into the room. Ganelon had ordered them both hot grog to promote a good night's sleep, for early the next morning he and Lucas would take a sledded carriage across the Gulf of Finland ice to Kronstadt where the *Guido Tancredi* waited to take them home. They had planned to return by train as they had come. But, fearing for Ganelon's safety, Prince Feinhart had insisted on sending the royal steam yacht to bring them back.

Ganelon continued his examination of the box until a voice asked, "Does the gentleman know the Firebird legend?" The speaker was a young, many-buttoned bellman with a pug nose of Russian design, a round head, and eyes at once shrewd and eager to be of use. Ganelon knew the look well. When young he had often stood on the other side of it.

As the bellman set a saucer with Ganelon's steaming glass of grog on the desk and began preparing Lucas's drink, he told Ganelon the Firebird story, a nesting-doll of a tale filled with quests within quests, a dutiful son who set out to find a fabulous bird who shone like the sun and fed on golden apples from his father's silver tree, deep forests, a talking wolf, a beautiful princess, murderous brothers, and the hero's corpse restored to life by magical waters.

At the end Ganelon asked, "Is this a story your mother told you at her knee?"

"I grew up in the orphans' workhouse, sir. All I know of the Firebird I've found in books." The bellman paused as if afraid he had become too talkative. When Ganelon gave him an encouraging look the young man continued. "A Chinese guest once told me that among his people they say that no matter how thick the candle, it cannot illuminate the future. But I have read that a single feather

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from our Russian Firebird shines so brightly that it can pierce the darkness of the past as far back as childhood itself."

With a bow the young man departed with his trolley. When he had finished his drink Ganelon bid Lucas good night and retired to his bedroom, taking the enameled box with him. As he undressed he reviewed the legend, then, setting the box on the bedside table, he turned off the gas lamp and went to bed. Once during the night he woke and thought he saw a narrow line of light somewhere in the room as if the darkness had been slit with a knife. But before he could locate its source he fell back into a pleasant dream.

The next morning while he packed Ganelon remembered the light and decided Lucas had stayed up late to read and what he had seen had been his lamplight showing under the bedroom door. Smiling at his imagination, he buried the box deep in his luggage.

Down in the hotel lobby Ganelon was not surprised to find the bellman from the night before waiting with their luggage. The smiling young man picked up his burden and followed the detective and Lucas outside to the sledded carriage. They got in with the other passengers while the bellman hoisted their bags up to the coachman.

Then Ganelon leaned out the carriage window, gave a gruff smile, and poured all his and Lucas's loose Russian change into the surprised young man's palm. The bellman gave a low bow as the carriage pulled away down the alley. When it turned onto the Nevsky Prospekt, Ganelon looked back and caught a last glance of the many-buttoned personage as he gave a little skip and trotted back into the hotel.

The young bellman reminded Ganelon of himself. As the carriage passed from street to frozen canal and then out onto the broad surface of the Neva with its community of temporary buildings set out on the ice, he found himself reflecting back on his own childhood.

Ganelon had come into the world eight months after Waterloo. His mother worked as a maid at a small inn, the Saracen Dog, on the outskirts of San Sebastiano. Unmarried, she returned to her parents' small farm on the Porpentine's eastern shore before her pregnancy was noticeable.

As soon as she could after Ambrose's birth, she came back to the Saracen Dog and smuggled the child up into her room above the stable, where she kept him from crying by adding brandy to his milk as her farmer parents did. As he grew she taught him to be quiet when she was at work and to stay away from the windows, pretending they were playing a game. He remembered believing

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that the raspy back-and-forth of the sign hanging over the door of the inn was the sound the Egyptian wolfhound made.

Ganelon's mother died when he was four. The innkeeper kept him on to blacken boots, scrub pots, and run errands. Growing up, the boy learned to keep his eyes and ears open and to make himself useful to the traveling merchants who stopped at the inn.

Eight years later some reactionary bureaucrat remembered that the Saracen Dog had sheltered Napoleon himself overnight on his return from Elba, and had the inn closed and the owner thrown in jail. From then on Ganelon lived on the street, where his exact knowledge of San Sebastiano's back alleys and warrens made him invaluable to his traveling merchants. He was their guide and errand runner. That was his childhood.

Just as the sledded carriage glided out onto the wilder ice of the Gulf of Finland, Ganelon recalled something someone had just said about childhood. Ah yes, it had been the afternoon he went to the Soutines' for tea and to pick up the letter of introduction to the shopkeeper. Soutine had been there, and his wife, a dark-eyed woman with a handsome face and an air of exhaustion. And Madame Fleury, a plain, large-featured gentlewoman of reduced circumstances whom Madame Soutine met years before on a rest cure and hired to be governess to her nephew Eric Neuville. Madame Fleury was now her personal companion.

Anxious to practice politeness for his Russian trip, Ganelon had remarked on Neuville's photograph on the mantel, a handsome young officer in lancer's full dress with a feathery, fair-haired moustache. "A fine-looking young man," he said.

Madame Soutine managed a smile. "My uncle Amédée took it. Eric was a difficult boy. All the Neuville men are wild, their minds always over the next horizon."

One of Madame Soutine's brothers had run away to sea. Another was killed in a gunrunning adventure into Ethiopia. Her oldest brother, Luc Neuville, the famous archaeologist, had discovered the ancient Persian city of Ariadnopolis with its celebrated web-shaped labyrinth into which he had vanished some twenty years before, never to be seen again. Madame Soutine had taken up the education of his son Eric after his father's disappearance.

"When Eric came into my hands," she said, "I determined to keep his nose to the grindstone of learning and prepare him for a career in the law. I failed, but at least he was able to harness his wildness and serve the principality in the Lancers. Madame Fleury thinks I was too severe with him."

Ganelon remembered her companion's remark: "What do I know of childhood, madame? A woman who is not pretty has never been young."

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The adventure of crossing the Gulf of Finland ice behind them and safely on board the *Guido Tancredi,* Ganelon and Lucas began the first leg of their voyage home.

At Hamburg a police delegation insisted on coming on board for speeches and a presentation of grateful floral bouquets for Ganelon's past assistance in dealing with Dr. Fong and his minions. Then down on the winter quay the gendarmerie band played San Sebastiano's national anthem, "The Cabbage and the Rose Entwined." Standing there at attention on the deck Ganelon solved one puzzle surrounding the enameled box: why Soutine had chosen him to bring it home. Had the detective returned by train as planned, at every major stop and border crossing there would have been similar speeches, floral tributes, and police bands. No customs official would have presumed to examine Ganelon's luggage and the box would reach San Sebastiano unopened. But why was that so important?

Ganelon spent the next few days at sea catching up on the news and improving his English by reading back issues of *Galignani's Messenger.* He was pleased to find there a small item about an Orkney Islands shipbuilder who had set out for the island of Formosa in the *Queen of the Night,* a cutter built entirely of wood, with pegs instead of nails.

A few years before, Ganelon's adversary Dr. Fong had attempted to steal the Blue Peter, the diamond centerpiece in the circlet crown of the princes of San Sebastiano. Before he could punish the man for his audacity Fong disappeared from sight. Ganelon's people found him at last in the Westray-Ronaldsay-Stronsay area of the Orkneys, where the natives spoke a patois close to pig Latin. One of Fong's criminal enterprises, Udwiglay Ongfay Shipbuilders, was located there, constructing and operating coffin ships to carry poor Scots emigrants to America, ships which invariably sank as soon as they were out of sight of land.

To flush the villain from his island stronghold, Ganelon wrote a pseudonymous review of an imaginary travel book, *Forbidden Formosa,* by a nonexistent Wolf von Urlich, and arranged to have it published in the *Edinburgh Magazine.* The review recounted von Urlich's adventures as a castaway on the mysterious fog-bound island from which no ship has ever returned. Fighting his way through cannibal tribes to the interior of the island the author discovers the fabulous Magnetic Mountain capable of drawing out the nails and rivets from passing ships, sinking them in its shark-infested coastal waters. But he also found lagoons thick with black pearls. Ganelon knew Fong valued black pearls above all the jewels of his considerable collection.

With the help of the captain of the *Guido Tancredi,* Ganelon now spent a good part of the trip home poring over sea charts.

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According to their calculations the *Queen of the Night* should reach and vanish into Formosan waters during Christmas week, a victim of the augur-nosed termite fish of the South China Sea.

When this determination had been made, Ganelon thanked the captain. Then he took down an atlas and with calipers made some calculations on another matter which had been plaguing his mind.

At the end of Ganelon's tea at the Soutines' his hostess was called away to the kitchen and his host retired to write out the letter of introduction. While Ganelon waited, Madame Fleury asked if he would like to see the family's famous library.

Ganelon welcomed the opportunity. The house and its twenty-thousand-book library had been bequeathed to the Abbey of the Holy Vernicle some two hundred years before on condition that the book collection be kept intact. To that end the monks decided to establish a study house for visiting scholars. Eventually that proved impractical and they sold the building and library to a private individual.

The library was forty feet square, rising to an open second-floor gallery reached by two staircases. The bookcases on both levels were elaborately carved, the uprights in oak leaves and acorns, the shelves in tendrils and berries. Coming into the room was like entering a clearing in an old forest, an effect increased by the carved faces of the legendary Green Men who peered, here and there, through the ornamental foliage as if lured by the curious sight of books and readers.

Before the building came into Soutine's hands, someone had covered the library doors and the columns which supported the roof and gallery with simulated book spines. The wastepaper baskets, stair risers, and lampshades were decorated the same way.

Madame Fleury led Ganelon over to a simple school desk in one corner. On its wooden top in deep flourishing letters was inscribed the name "Eric St. Barbe Neuville" with a dull instrument as if a pencil had traveled over them again and again and again.

"When I first came here," she said, "Madame Soutine's idea of educating the boy was to keep him locked up in the library, as if he could acquire knowledge by osmosis," said Madame Fleury. "She is a woman of great determination but little energy. Perhaps it was the best she could do. Personally I have always imagined childhood as more a garden than a library. Sharp-corner things like books and ledgers will intrude soon enough."

Ganelon recalled gesturing to the bookcase branch-and-tendril carvings and remarking, "It is something of a garden." Now it occurred to him that the carved faces and leaves had a vague resemblance to the decoration on the edges of Soutine's box.

Madame Fleury continued, "I begged Madame Soutine to let the boy run about more freely. But she refused. So to keep my pupil

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sane, one morning after his lessons were done I said, 'Come, Eric, you and I will walk together to Ariadnopolis in Persia where your father vanished.' So we set out walking with measured paces around and around the library while I tried to describe the scenery and the small towns we were passing through. By the time we stopped for the day the principality was well behind us. That evening after dinner I sent him back to the library to read up on the geological composition of the Alps Maritime, the mountains we would pass through, so he could describe them to me as we went.

"The next morning I brought our lunch in a picnic basket and we set out again up and down the stairs to simulate the terrain. He kept right up with me with a stride as befits the long legs of a future cavalry officer. When we stopped along the way I would talk about the history of the wild Intemelli who even the Romans feared and who gave their name to the city of Ventimiglia. Our first full day we traveled twenty miles, which would be our daily distance for the rest of our imaginary travels. The day we crossed the Italian border I began to teach him Latin and I had him return here after dinner and prepare a short naval history of Genoa.

"Even Madame Soutine remarked on his animation at table and his improved appetite. I think from that point her confidence in me began to grow."

Here Soutine entered the library with the letter of introduction. Ganelon had only time to ask how long it took them to reach Ariadnopolis. Madame Fleury's answer had puzzled him.

The work which had accumulated at the agency in his absence obliged Ganelon to send Soutine his box by messenger. Busy or not, the detective was in a holiday mood, not just because of the *Queen of the Night*'s fate but because his son had returned on vacation from the university. They had many long discussions, particularly about Fiston's work under a famous Viennese graphologist who believed that writers who failed to dot their *i*'s and cross their *t*'s had lied and were unconsciously giving themselves an excuse to return and correct what they had written.

Fiston went back to his university studies right after the New Year. The following day Ganelon received a cable from his man in Macao. Dr. Ludwig Fong had been rescued from the Formosa Strait, the sole survivor of the *Queen of the Night,* thanks to that maritime novelty, the patented celluloid lifeboat. If the detective was cast down by the news, an invitation to dinner at the Soutines' in early January pleased him. He still had questions surrounding the enameled box.

❖ ❖ ❖

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His visit to the Russian quarter was a short jog in time from the Gregorian to the Julian calendar and Christmas Day all over again. The shops and cafes wore festive decorations and the street life resembled the great fair at Nizhnii Novgorod. The Soutines, Ganelon discovered, had invited him to their Christmas dinner.

When he arrived he expressed his disappointment that Eric Neuville wasn't there for the occasion. But his host explained, "Eric sails for Tripoli as I speak."

"He dropped by this afternoon for a moment just to collect his presents and leave his own under the tree," added Madame Soutine.

The others at table were Madame Fleury and Madame Soutine's uncle Amédée Neuville, the photographer, a tall, thin man who went about the principality dressed in black like a mute at a funeral and always wore a tragic expression which, it was said, deepened the more he failed in his urging to get his subjects to smile.

"Uncle dines with us every Christmas and afterwards he takes our photograph together around the tree," said Madame Soutine, looking at her uncle affectionately.

The photographer smiled back. Then he turned to the detective. "Monsieur Ganelon," he said, "just as my niece, though no more than a child, was a ministering angel to my ailing sister and a nurturing angel for my wild, wild Neuville nephews, so she has become a guardian angel to her uncle in his old age."

Neuville, Ganelon now remembered, was an ardent member of the Philangeli, a local society which believed that angels walk among us and are best glimpsed at sunrise and sunset when they move through the transitional light like ghosts on staircases traveling between the floors of the afterlife. The Philangeli published a pocket guidebook to the various choirs of angels, identifying them by wing bars, aureoles, and eye stripes, and gave a prize to the member who saw the first cherub in the spring.

Amédée Neuville also proved himself to be something of a bore with only two topics of conversation: photography and angels. He dominated the fish course with a combination of both, discussing a process he was working on to capture angels on ectoplasmically sensitive plates.

Later in the meal Madame Fleury tried to redirect the conversation by asking Ganelon how he had enjoyed his trip to St. Petersburg. The detective assured her that the Russian winter was worse than any story she might have heard and expressed his own preference for the jumbled streets of San Sebastiano to the planned city drawn with Peter the Great's autocratic straightedge.

Then there was a lull in the conversation. Neuville said, "Angels are passing." But before the man could gallop off again on his

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hobbyhorse Ganelon turned to Soutine and asked, "Did your box live up to expectations?"

Soutine's eyes twinkled as if he was amused by the detective's curiosity. "Oh, I haven't opened it yet. No, no, we always leave our presents until after Christmas dinner."

"You mean it's under the tree?" said Ganelon. "I only ask because of its value. The shopkeeper told me he could have sold it many times for twice the price you paid."

Soutine laughed. "Forgive me. But talking about the contents of the box with a man who deals in buying and selling the common variety of things is like discussing the Bluebird of Happiness with a chicken farmer."

Soutine continued, "No, the box is quite secure. Let me tell you a story. Thirty years ago I suffered a brief passion for antique cameos. My principal worry was how to protect them from burglars but keep them near at hand. I even thought of buying one of those wall safes Lampion the locksmith hid so cleverly behind his son-in-law Eduard Severin's aquarelle views of the Old Port. Do you know the ones I mean?"

Ganelon nodded. On visits to the Municipal Gallery of Art he could still pick out the old safecrackers by the way their eyes lit up when they saw a Severin.

"But why did I need a painting when I had a library of twenty thousand books to conceal the safe?" asked Soutine. "So I had Lampion install one behind four books in the library.

"But one night in the study while I sat fussing over my cameos my sainted mother entered. 'My son,' she said in mock horror, 'you look the very image of old King Kashchey.' Once, years before, my mother had shown me the picture of the terrible old miser king in her childhood book of fairy tales. Glancing up, I saw his furtive look and greedy lips on my own reflection in the mirror on the wall.

"The very next day I sold my cameo collection and my little hiding place stood empty until you brought me the box. And that is where the box is now, quite safe and sound."

Neuville said, "If it's in the library then the angels who walk there will most certainly protect it."

Ganelon knew the photographer referred to the story of the Miraculous Library, a tale which inspired Soufflot's avant-garde opera of the same name. Father Cosmos, the librarian at the Abbey of the Holy Vernicle's study house, was a firm believer that God speaks in silence. He was also blessed with an authoritative "Shush!" But Father Cosmos also had a mystical streak and sometimes fell into rapture while returning books to their shelves. Over the years he misplaced so many that the library became useless to scholarship and had to be closed.

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Father Cosmos was transferred to the order's house in Rome where he became famous for his piety. Years later when the cardinals deadlocked during the election of a new pope, they compromised by choosing the saintly priest. A legend often cited as proof of papal infallibility states that at the moment of Father Cosmos's election, angels descended from Heaven, found every book he had misplaced in his lifetime, and returned them to where they belonged.

"Ironic, that," smiled Amédée Neuville. "Angels guarding the Firebird's Feather."

"Is that what the box contains?" asked Ganelon, who always felt uneasy if a case approached the frontier of the Land of Fairy. When Soutine nodded the detective said, "And does the bird only have one feather?"

Soutine laughed. "Oh, it has the normal complement. But some lay on view in cabinets of curiosities, others hang in frames on museum walls. Mine, however, has remained in darkness in a box for a hundred years, its power pent up. I have the documentation."

"And the nature of this power?"

"The Firebird's Feather," said Soutine, "comes down to us from a time when magic walked and fantastic animals roamed and days were golden and without care, a time I have never seen. My childhood fell by the wayside somewhere between my family's flight from Russia and my early apprenticeship in my trade. All my life I have felt the loss, like an ache from some long-severed limb. The Firebird's Feather will heal all that in a flash of glorious light."

Ganelon started, remembering the bright slit in the bedroom darkness back at the Hotel du Nord on the last night of his stay in Russia with Soutine's box there on the bedside table. Then he gave a dismissive snort. "A Fountain of Youth?" he asked incredulously. "Boyhood in a box?"

"No, merely a healing glimpse of childhood."

Ganelon turned from Soutine with a shake of his head and lost every interest in the box and its fairy-tale content. Why should moments be free of care? Who should yearn for puppy-dog days? He let his end of the conversation die. In an instant Neuville was imitating the piping song the seraphim made.

After dessert they adjourned to the drawing room for coffee and brandy. And Russian cigarettes, to which Soutine was addicted. Ganelon's host stood near the ivory cigarette box on the mantel beneath a large silver-framed mirror. The two women sat on a striped Empire-style sofa. Ganelon took an armchair across from them. Amédée Neuville sat next to his camera on its tripod, rummaging through his shoulder bag of attachments and supplies.

In one corner a Christmas tree sheltered a heap of bright presents. When the time came to open them Soutine excused himself

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to get the enameled box from the wall safe in the library. Family tradition required the youngest person there to carry the gifts around to the others one by one. In Eric's absence Madame Fleury did the honors. Before she had distributed the first round Soutine appeared in the doorway, his face as white as chalk. He came over and whispered in the detective's ear, "My Firebird's Feather has been stolen."

Ganelon's interest in the enameled box came tumbling back. He excused himself and followed Soutine over to the library and up into the second-floor gallery. In a corner darker than most, four books lay on the floor. The wall behind the empty shelf space nearby showed no trace of a door.

"I closed the door before going to get you," explained the champagne merchant. "I wanted to demonstrate how impossible it would be to steal the Firebird's Feather. As you can see, even if a would-be thief went through the library pulling all the books off the shelves he still wouldn't find the wall safe. He still couldn't get inside. Unless he knew how to unlock the door." Soutine reached over to the side of the carved bookcase, found one of the many Green Man faces which peered from the wooden foliage throughout the library, and pressed its left eye. There was a click and the door popped open a crack.

"Very clever," said Ganelon. "And who else knew of your hiding place?"

"Only my wife and Madame Fleury. After I'd sold the cameos I told them about the door and the button in the eye. Why not? I was proud of my ingenuity. But I made them swear never to tell anyone else. And I never, never told them which of these twenty thousand books concealed the wall safe."

"Could one of them have found it over the years?"

"Why would they bother? They knew the hiding place was *empty*."

Ganelon considered this remark for a moment. Then he asked, "When was the last time you saw your box?"

"Just after lunch. I went to the library intending to put it under the tree with the other presents. But with all the traffic through the house with neighbors coming by to wish us the compliments of the season and share a glass of champagne with us, I decided against it and shut the box up again."

"So it was common knowledge you had the Firebird's Feather and what its power was?"

"Oh yes."

"I suggest we rejoin the others," said Ganelon. Before Soutine could protest he added, "I have this matter well in hand. But for the moment let us keep the theft to ourselves."

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Back in the drawing room the presents under the tree had been distributed around the room and three or four sat at each place. There was even one for Ganelon. No one had moved to open anything. Now they began, admiring each gift and showing it to the room. Ganelon's present was a brightly painted figure of a policeman with long cape and sword and a tricorne with the pink and blue cockade of San Sebastiano. In fact, it was a set of nesting dolls, each policeman dressed in a uniform of a different color. Ganelon was a bit disappointed to find only three more gendarmes inside. He had rather hoped he was founding a longer line than that.

When Amédée Neuville had opened his last gift he jumped up and excused himself. "My memory would make an angel weep," he said. "I have forgotten my new improved phosphorescent powder from America which I meant to try out tonight. If it isn't around the corner in my cart then I've left it at home." The photographer hurried away.

The others worked quickly and soon nothing remained of the pile of presents under the tree except for one which Madame Fleury had set aside unopened. When Ganelon pointed this out to her she explained, "It is from Eric. In his note he asked me not to open it until I was alone in my room. I don't know why."

Ganelon nodded. "But you see, madame, Monsieur Soutine's Firebird's Feather has been stolen."

"I don't understand."

"I believe Eric stole it to give it to you, Madame Fleury," said the detective.

Standing at the mantel, Soutine uttered a noise of disbelief. "Eric a thief? Impossible!" He took a cigarette and started to lean forward to light it at a candle in one of the mirror sconces. But he stopped to watch as Madame Fleury unwrapped her present, revealing the enameled box. Soutine uttered a cry.

"But Eric didn't even know the hiding place existed," insisted his wife.

"No, madame, I'm afraid he did," confessed Madame Fleury. "You see, I told him. Years ago when he was only a child. Remember when I had to return home to nurse my mother in her final illness?"

"Those three weeks? Yes, I remember."

"I was concerned for Eric's mental state, being confined in the library for hours at a time. Yes, I'd given my word to tell no one about the library wall safe. But it was empty. So to keep Eric's mind stimulated in my absence I set him the task of finding the hiding place in the library."

"And did he succeed?"

"Oh yes," she said proudly. "It wasn't easy, but he found it. He

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said he pulled out the books a shelf at a time and stuck his finger in the nearest Green Man's eye. Then he replaced the books and moved on to the next shelf. And so on. He wanted to show me the hiding place. But I refused because I didn't think that would be right."

Madame Fleury looked down at the box. "I blame myself. This happy season sometimes leaves me feeling sorry for myself. Perhaps something I said made him think I envied Monsieur Soutine his Firebird's Feather. It was very foolish of Eric to take it. Or to think I would keep it for myself. If anything, he should have given it to you, madame, his aunt who cared for him all his life."

Madame Fleury got up and carried the box over to Madame Soutine. But she refused to take it, pointing over to Soutine instead. So Madame Fleury set the box down on the mantel next to Soutine's elbow and returned to her place.

Soutine was standing with his back to the room. After a moment he turned and, with an embarrassed smile, nodded over his shoulder to the mirror and said, "I've just had another visit from my sainted mother and King Kashchey, that terrible old miser." After a moment he continued, "Eric foolish? No, I think he just wanted to get my attention and show me how selfish I have become."

He picked up the enameled box. "Well, it isn't too late to make amends," he said. "Let's open the box right now. Together."

As Ganelon watched, the two women demurred—Madame Fleury, the plain-faced one who had never been young, and Madame Soutine, whose childhood had been spent caring for an ailing mother and three wild brothers.

But Soutine was resolute. He brought his chair over and sat down beside them. "You must. You cannot shame me. Oh, perhaps the power of the Firebird's Feather may be somewhat less if shared. Still I'm sure there will be enough to go around."

Then, as an afterthought, Soutine said, "You join us, too, Monsieur Ganelon. After all, without you it wouldn't have come to us unopened."

Ganelon rose to take his departure. "Thank you," he said a bit stiffly as he stuffed his nest of policemen dolls under his arm. "But my childhood was idyllic." He left Soutine and his wife and Madame Fleury looking down at the enameled box and talking quietly like friends who have come together after a long time apart and have much to say and much to hear.

Ganelon strode to the cabstand at the end of the street. His calculations with the maps and calipers back on board the *Guido Tancredi* had led him to his determination that Madame Fleury's imaginary journey to Ariadnopolis with the young Eric Neuville had taken three weeks longer than it ought.

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Mounting into the four-wheeler at the curb, he glanced back at the Soutine mansion. As he did, the modest light in the drawing room windows flared into a startling golden light. In the moment that it lasted the detective had a vivid picture of a woman's face smiling down at him, his mother's face.

Ganelon stood transfixed on the carriage step and then, laughing at himself, he got in. There was, of course, a simple explanation for the light. Amédée Neuville had returned, gone up to the drawing room by a different flight of stairs, and taken the family portrait in a bright phosphorescent puff.

Ganelon rapped on the carriage roof and the vehicle rolled forward. Then he sat back in the darkness and thought of his mother again. She had been a plain-faced woman, though her eyes were intelligent and she had a wild-rose complexion which, in an age when one person out of three was marked by the smallpox, might have made some consider her a beauty. What a joy to have so dim a memory come rushing back to him dressed in colors bright and new.

Just then the carriage passed a streetlight and he recognized the figure of Amédée Neuville hurrying back to the Soutines' like a mute late for a funeral. The photographer was carrying a canister containing, Ganelon was certain, his new, improved American phosphorescent powder. ●

"Chicken Little was ahead of her time. She must have known all about the ozone layer."

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"Does the Butterfly..."

by Jeffry Scott

It isn't hard to understand where Jeffry Scott gets his ideas. For thirty years he was a national newspaper reporter in Britain, covering every type of story imaginable. As he says: "Plenty of useful background material has come my way over the decades." Add to that that fiction writing is in his blood—both his parents were commercially successful fiction writers—and one sees why his storytelling is so natural. †

In Chaz's opinion you couldn't trust nothing. If things were good then they didn't last. Same with people. Some could be all right for a while but they'd let you down or take liberties or simply turn nasty.

Nothing and nobody. Except for Lister, of course.

Lister had turned Chaz around in countless ways. For instance, no more "reading" the *Sun*—back pages for the sports, sheepishly covert study of the latest topless girl on page three. Lister made him really read a real newspaper, all but long-words passages and the City section, mostly figures and the print was tiny.

Chaz had been astounded: A paper could last hours. "Education," Lister preached. "Knowledge is power." And boy, he had some knowledge. Libraries of books in that narrow, ledge-cheeked, shaven head.

Mind you, even newspapers with hard words could get things wrong. Chaz came across this piece saying most inmates shouldn't be in prison. What a laugh, but he was pretty sure that was what the guy was driving at, crazy as it seemed. Over half the prison population was in for drugs-related offenses when they needed medical treatment, a cure. Prison didn't stop them wanting drugs, so most likely they would do more crimes after release.

That flew with Chaz. A big surprise about grown-up nick was the amount of drugs sloshing about—all the puff in the world, a fair amount of coke, heroin, too. Just about as much and sometimes more than he'd noticed on the street.

But then the prat spoiled hisself. Went on to argue that prison was young offenders' university, "criminal higher-education estab-

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lishments funded by society." In other words, old cons taught kids to be worse villains. "Year on year the wind is sown, and the whirlwind gains power." Whatever that meant.

Chaz got . . . so . . . angry. Fellow in the paper practically telling the world he knew all about Chaz's good fortune, and that wasn't right. It dissed Lister. If Chaz could have got hold of the writer prat, look out!

Because Lister had been the making of him. Lister was teaching him things, expanding his mind. Not classroom stuff, next two periods are Geography, get your books out. Although Chaz hadn't spent much time in school past age twelve, he was certain he could have turned up every day and still learned nothing of use.

Lister's schooling was different. Urging Chaz to think for himself, see things as they were and not as authority sold them. "Property is theft," said Lister. "Don't sweat the details, take my word. It is. Property is theft, so who are the true criminals?"

Made Chaz's head spin, did that. Had him walking taller for weeks.

"We are *political* prisoners," Lister explained. "Forget menaces to society. Society menaces those brave enough to reject its perceptions. In a sane world we would be the heroes, the role models. Warrior priests, no shame in that."

Intoxicating, boundary-widening seminars.

The nick wasn't short of brainboxes, several on this wing alone. Couple of company directors (lethally dangerous driving; the "mercy killing" of a son) and a scientist with ever so many letters after his name (arson; he'd burnt a rival research place down).

The crucial difference lay in the tutor never talking down to Chaz. Furthermore, Lister had the authority of a veteran crim and he was well hard besides. Might be a boring oddball on the surface but don't be fooled: either put paid to him straight off, kill the mad bastard, or leave him be. Lister had not asserted that, he didn't talk rough, talk big—that was another difference. Chaz heard it elsewhere, and frequently.

To be befriended by such a man, to be considered worthy of teaching . . . It made Chaz's chest swell and his spine straighten. He wasn't, you know, like that at all. Fully normal, red-blooded youth, thanks very much. But he loved Lister like the dad he'd never seen and the big brother he'd never had—the actual one offered nothing but grief, with casual sadism thrown in until Chaz ran away to fend for himself.

It was painful, confusing, when others whom he liked or respected failed to see Lister as he did.

"Has he walked on water for you yet?" Dublin Jack teased soon after Lister and Chaz hooked up.

Well, of course Lister had not, nobody could, they'd bloody

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drown. And where would you find that much water in prison? Chaz waited for the punch line; he wasn't good at jokes.

"I mean, yer man has all the answers but not to the right questions, hey? Haven't you seen his eyes?" Henry had rolled his own, tapping forefinger against temple.

What a question. Lister's eyes had conquered Chaz from the off. They were fragments of blue sky, late summer sky, pale and empty, happening to be suspended either side of a broken nose. Went straight through you and out the far side.

Lister had stopped an excited crew kicking spit out of Chaz for noisy resistance to getting hauled into the showers, washing not the object—but that stare would have made him a convert anyway.

"He's loony, a total nutter," Dublin Jack stated matter-of-factly. "He looks out for you, keeps you safe, very nice and does him credit. Better to be lucky than clever, hey? Just for Christ's sake steer clear of him outside, kid. No reunions, right?"

"You saying Lister's stupid?"

Dublin Jack had laughed the short, impatient yelp of a frustrated prophet. "I meant you, boy. *He's* clever enough, intelligence-wise. That fellah could lecture at college. Only he's got no common sense, get me? Parts missing in here." This time the woodpecker finger pecked Jack's forehead. "Don't get me wrong. I've said this to his face: great guy but he's what us head-doctors term friggin' loony-tunes. A stranger on this planet."

"Screw you, Paddy, you 'n the IRA together." Gasped out, for a steel band squeezed Chaz's chest tighter than his fists were clenched. While as much afraid as furious, he was a committed defender of the faith.

"Leave it," Dublin Jack sighed, shambling off. He had inches of reach and thirty pounds on the young idiot. Dublin J would sooner die than be faced down, he was a brawler for pleasure or profit, but he wasn't intolerant.

When Chaz reported the slander, pouring out his indignation, Lister was dismissive. "Mockery—get used to it. People knock what they can't understand. Leave them in darkness, move on." Later the same day, during Association, Lister and Dublin Jack played chess as usual, perfectly amicably. His guru was a great-hearted man, Chaz decided.

Now, hearing the electronic yammer of police cars, Chaz's faith in Lister was unflawed. He was swept by dread and felt sodden with shame but none of that was down to his patron. He'd failed Lister, was what it was.

A hundred yards behind them the level-crossing gates had crashed shut, red lights flashing, and a train began passing, wagon after wagon, very slowly. Perhaps three hundred yards

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ahead was the narrow alley police cars couldn't get through.

Only . . . between the alley and the motorbike's rider and pillion passenger was a raw new wooden wall some fifteen feet high, right across the roadway. On it a notice, paint fresh enough for sunlight to bounce off its gloss, announced: FOSTER & GAMMICK'S NEW FACTORY DEVELOPMENT FOR A CITY ON THE MOVE! Below, triumphalism hardening into warning, came *No unauthorised entry. Keep out—24 hour security—Danger, guard dogs on site.*

Chaz could have wept.

The bike rocked as Lister dismounted from behind him. Jeans and denim jacket over a pristine white T-shirt had the air of uniform. The semiautomatic pistol riding in the waistband of the jeans stressed the military note. Calmly he set a weighty sports bag down beside the back wheel and contemplated the wall.

"That wasn't there before," Chaz faltered. "They must've . . ." He gestured helplessly. "So quick, two days back that wasn't there. I've rode the route over and over, practising."

"A good route," Lister solaced him. "I approved it, remember. Not your fault. Kismet." Chaz could tell that an idea was striking Lister, who was nodding to himself, unruffled.

They had been out of prison for three weeks. Minutes ago Lister had walked into a jeweller's, fired one shot into the ceiling, and filled the sports bag. Chaz waited outside, wincing at the gunshot but forcing his hand to keep blipping the twist-grip throttle when he yearned to yank the clutch lever, toe the gear pedal, and rocket away. Lister walked out eventually, not ran, boarded the bike, and had to prompt, "Ready when you are." Loyalty-driven willpower was keeping them stationary.

Chaz was good on two wheels and despite heavy traffic they were half a mile from the shopping mall before sighting a police vehicle. It was parked half up on the footpath, empty. They were four miles across the city before sirens could be heard in their wake, soon louder—meaning closer. Tough on the nerves, but there'd be an end to it shortly, thanks to the plan.

Unexpectedly and devastatingly out of reach, the alley meandered a fraction over a quarter of a mile to the rear of council-owned flats. There the switch car waited in a lock-up garage. Primer paint patched over good panels, plastic buckets on the backseat, ladders lashed to the roof rack. Hide in plain sight: Coppers would look for a getaway car, not working stiffs crawling along seeking windows to wash.

The car might as well have been on the moon.

"Good route," Lister repeated. The eyes locked on Chaz's. "Bear up, I'll get us through this."

The train kept tramping by, making the crossing impassable.

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The law couldn't get at them just yet, there was that.

Lister completed a methodical scan of the area. They were in a partly derelict industrial estate. The concrete road, slightly wider than standard to allow for trucks bearing bulky loads, was blocked at one end by the crossing gates, and the new palisade at the other. The road was walled each side by windowless warehouses and workshops behind razorwire fences. Most buildings were deserted, doors and loading-bay entries boarded up and bearing private security companies' signs.

At the nearest tenanted place a guard had shut himself in the kiosk beside closed gates. Pale egg of face turned towards them, he was snatching up a phone.

"Ah," Lister muttered, "they've stopped, that's better." There'd been competing sirens, the maddening *hee-haw, hee-haw* of a robot jackass taunting fugitives, and a lilting huntsman's cry. Both had fallen silent.

The train passed at last. Suddenly it was quiet enough for a jetliner, high and out of sight, to audibly scratch its way over.

"A perfect trap," Lister observed. He sounded abstracted, with a hint of wry amusement. "Kismet and karma."

Before the job Chaz had told himself this: Supposing they got caught, so what? He'd go back inside; he'd been there before and survived. Lister said prison was mainly a state of mind. Plenty outside had less freedom, self-shackled by herd thinking.

Now that they were done for, bound to get caught, the prospect was harder to shrug off. Chaz was appalled to discover how much he loathed prison after all.

Had he been alone, he would have thrown himself on the ground and curled into a ball, swearing and sobbing. He'd been so proud of himself, finding that alley to the garage Lister had borrowed. Prouder still after Lister first spotted the level-crossing gates and gave him a quizzical, what's wrong with this picture? glance.

From the top of the hill you could see whether the gates were open or shut. Open was best, but otherwise there was time to take a sharp left between a brace of shops, emerging on another road to the council flats. What Chaz had wanted was for the gates to be swinging across, and they had been. He'd jinked through the narrowing gap, scraping both elbows on the final set's wooden jaws, *that* finely timed.

Police stuffed, Lister impressed, daydream come true. Until FOSTER & GAMMICK'S and CITY ON THE MOVE revealed otherwise.

Chaz got off the bike and lifted his hands, letting it smash down on its side. Bloody thing, running just as sweet as he'd hoped when stealing it—sweetly running them here.

Suddenly he grasped how selfish he was being, how ungrateful. He ought to be pulling his weight, not whining. It was down to

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him to make things better, and he could.

"Alley's still the other side of that, must be. I can boost you over. Take the stuff, I'll run another way, they might think we're still together." He felt better already.

Lister smiled gently. "They've switched off their noisemakers. No hurry anymore. Road maps, my friend. They'll have the alley covered by now. In a minute the crossing will open. Let's not be headless chickens. Didn't I say I will get us out of this?" His teeth bared. "I will not be beaten."

Chaz wanted to hug him. Such composure, such fierce confidence.

Responding to the disciple's surge of elation, Lister's bits-of-sky eyes brightened.

The crossing gates opened.

Lister confided, "I've always wondered . . . Key riddle, does the man dream he's a butterfly or the butterfly dream it's a man?"

He had called it correctly: the short procession of police vehicles was unhurried. One, two, three cars and a dog-handler's van curtseying in turn on bumping across the rails. At the edge of consciousness Chaz heard the invisible airliner nagging, fretful as a fly caught between curtain and windowpane.

"Yeah, but what do we do, what we gonna do?" He was too agitated to register his idol's momentary surprise and disappointment at his inability to see the obvious.

"We wake up," said Lister. Then he shot Chaz through the head before using the pistol on himself. ●

Caught Red-Handed
by Terry Hammond

Eddie and Matty and Leon and Frank
Banded together to rob a big bank.
Frankie the Finger, he mapped out the caper,
Drawing their plans on a sheet of graph paper.
Observing the bank guard—that job was Leon's.
Matty's big mission was getting them guns.
Choosing disguises was Eddie's first task.
He wanted wigs, but Frank favored masks.
They settled on stockings that shielded their faces,
And surgical gloves to cover their traces.
Things went just like clockwork, and they bagged lots of loot
And got clean away without having to shoot.
When they opened the bag, though, their plans went awry.
It's hard to cash bills that are dripping with dye.

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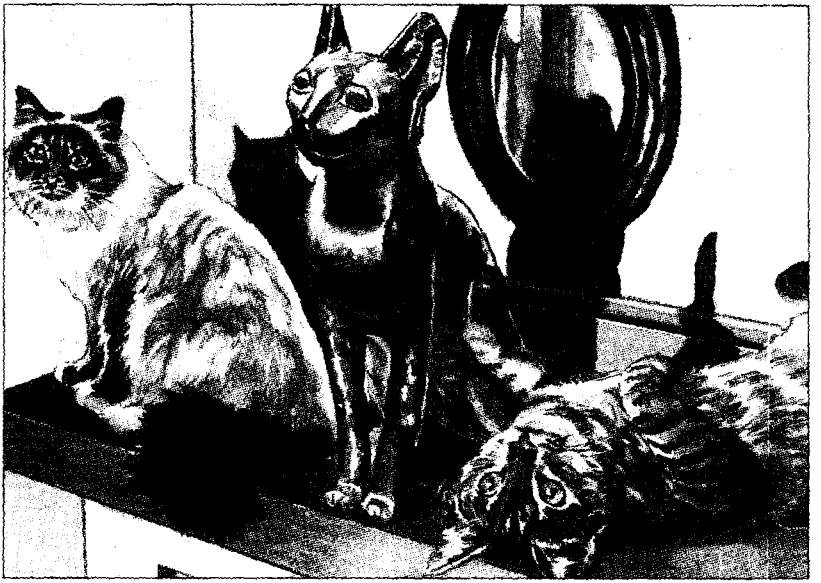

Art by Ron Buccalo

AMERICAN CURLS

by Nancy Springer

The minute Cindy pulled into Samantha's driveway, she knew something was badly wrong. Both house and cattery doors stood wide open to six inches of February snow, and Samantha would never let that happen. Good grief, the kitties might catch pneumonia and die. Something must have happened to Sam, and there were no neighbors around to help, because an animal shelter always had to be way out in the country. But what could be the matter? Had Samantha fallen and hit her head, maybe?

Heaving herself out of her ancient Pinto, Cindy tightened her scarf around her thinning mousy hair, hustling toward Samantha's rambler at the fastest gait her plus-sized body would allow. Footprints riddled the snow, from volunteers and adoption seekers coming and going all day. But among them Cindy saw myriad little paw prints. Dear Lord, every kitty in the place must have gotten out. They would freeze and starve and die. Even before she reached the house door and lunged inside, Cindy felt herself starting to cry.

But she stopped crying the instant she saw Samantha lying

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facedown on the carpet, her caramel-colored spiral curls soaked red with blood. This was a matter too serious for crying. She knelt by Samantha's side, calling, "Sam! Sam? Are you all right?"

Silence, except for pathetic meows from several directions. Some of the cats had stayed inside, evidently.

Cindy knew herself to be an idiot. Any fool could see Sam was not all right. With one chubby hand Cindy fumbled at the side of Sam's neck.

Yes, there was a pulse, but barely. Yes, Sam was taking a shallow breath now and then.

Cindy staggered up, yanked an afghan laden with much cat hair off the sofa, and blanketed Sam. She called 911. Then she called Devon, who was the volunteer at the head of the emergency phone chain. Not that Devon was good for much except wielding her cell phone. Devon liked to brush the kitties, not clean up after them, and she never set foot in the shelter without wearing rubber gloves to protect her French-tip manicure. But she was efficient in her country-club way, didn't waste time being shocked, just said she'd call out the troops. After Cindy hung up, she checked Sam again—still unconscious, but breathing—then headed through the connecting door from the house into the cattery.

Six or seven cats flowed out of boxes and rubbed her ankles, a swirl of black, white, orange. Cindy felt her eyes fill with tears at the sight of them. Standing at the wide-open door, she called into the wind, "Here, kitty kitty kitty!"

But no kitties appeared. And oh Lord, the box in the corner was empty. Where were the mama cat and her litter? Following the feline mother's instinct to hide her young, Queenie had taken her weanling kittens out in the freezing cold. And already the day was darkening toward nightfall.

Cindy began to weep in earnest. Okay, Sam had fallen and hit her head on something. But who had let all the cats out? And why?

"She keeps most of them in the house," Cindy explained to the detectives. Other volunteers wandered the night with flashlights, calling, peering into shrubbery, while Cindy cleaned up the mess

"'Conform, go crazy, or become an artist.' I have a rubber stamp declaring those words, and they pretty much delineate my life," says Nancy Springer, whose writing began with a few hours stolen from her conventional life as a housewife and mother and led to her writing both children's books and adult novels for a living. She has won two Edgar Awards, and last year she received a nomination for the Agatha Award for her *EQMM* story "Juggernaut" (6/01).

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in the cattery. "This room is just for the ones that don't use a litter box." Ferals, mostly, and the poor declaws. Didn't want to dig with their mutilated front paws. Several of them crowded Cindy's ankles, wailing like banshees. Cats were cats, even when they were designer kitties, purebred Himalayans and Cymrics and Russian Blues and Burmillas.

The cats lamented, and the detectives stood watching, but Cindy worked feverishly, gathering the dirty bedding, filling food and water bowls, then down on her knees scraping poop from the linoleum. Shock wouldn't let her sit still. The cops said Samantha hadn't hit her head. They said somebody had hit it for her. With Sam's favorite cat figurine, the stylized teakwood Siamese, which might have doubled as a bowling pin. The hospital said Sam was in stable condition, but what if she didn't get well? What would happen to the kitties? What would happen to them *now,* poor babies lost in the cold?

"How many cats did she have?" a detective demanded.

"Ninety-some."

"Good Lord."

"You see it all the time," said the other one, who was shorter and stockier. "Little old lady with too many cats."

"Whacked on the head?"

"Okay, so this one's a little old lesbian. Running a cathouse."

Cindy felt every overweight muscle tense. Samantha was not little, and not much older than fifty, and as for her being a lesbian, so what? Sam ran a cat *shelter,* for mercy's sake, fully accredited, with records, volunteers, adoptions . . . these cops were jerks. Cindy slammed her poop scraper into the sink and grabbed the scrub bucket.

"You'd know," the taller detective called to Cindy. "Who was her lover?"

Filling the bucket, Cindy just stared at him. She knew nothing of Sam's personal life and didn't care to.

"Okay," he tried again, "did she have a live-in?"

"Nobody else lived here."

"Any frequent visitors?"

Cindy stared again, wishing she could do it more like a dragon and less like a cow. Luckily, just then one of the volunteers, the mentally disabled girl, came in roaring softly to herself. Apparently this made the detectives uncomfortable. They retreated, ambling back into Sam's house. There wasn't much detecting for them to do, anyway. Sam would tell them when she woke up who had hit her.

The disabled girl set down an armload of snow-powdered cats. Cindy plopped herself on the floor, gathering kitties onto her lap to warm them and comfort them. And herself.

From time to time other volunteers tramped in, almost all mid-

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dle-aged women like Cindy. Stamping and sniffling, they talked to the cats in their arms. "Whatcha think you're doing out there? Doncha know how cold it is?" Only one of them was a man, an odd, silent young fellow who said nothing as he turned his cats over to Cindy.

"It looks like every volunteer on the list came running," Cindy blurted at him just because she was uncomfortable with his silence.

He nodded, but didn't say a word as he headed back outside.

"I lied," Cindy told the kitties purring in her arms, nestled against her ample chest. "Devon's not here." Which was not surprising. Devon was a fair-weather volunteer. Didn't like to take her brand-new Beemer convertible out of the garage in anything less.

Another middle-aged woman stumbled in from the snowy night with a cat under each arm. "Padiddle and Rapunzel," she announced, setting down a one-eyed feral and a yellow longhair. "Has anyone found Queenie and the kittens?"

"No! Where in the world did she get to?" How far could the little gray tabby have gone with a litter of six? Cindy bit her lip. "I can't understand it."

Much later, Cindy got home—her home for the time being, anyway. A rather impressive Tudor in the best old neighborhood. Mrs. Heckmaster was sitting in the front room working on one of those memory books with the fancy pages and the stickers and lettering from the craft store. "My goodness," she said, glancing up as Cindy stamped snow off her feet in the entryway, "what's the matter, dear? You look like you need a cookie."

Mrs. Heckmaster was a little old lady with blue poodle curls, and Cindy did not like her. But she didn't need to like her, just keep an eye on her and run errands for her. Living with Mrs. Heckmaster earned Cindy her room and board while freeing Mrs. Heckmaster's family, which happened to consist of Devon, the fair-weather volunteer from the shelter. Devon Heckmaster, back to her maiden name and getting richer by the day off alimony, whereas Cindy felt herself getting poorer. When Mrs. Heckmaster graduated to a nursing home or croaked, Cindy would have to find some other person to live with as a nanny or a pet sitter or a caregiver.

Forty-six years old and homeless. But in Cindy's experience, it was people like her, the ones with the least, who did the most for animals. Well, with the exception of Devon . . . but Cindy volunteered for the S.P.C.A., the horse sanctuary, the Dalmatian rescue, and the Humane Action League, and she knew Devon was an anomaly. She knew of no other rich country-clubbers who tried to help animals. Just ordinary folks. Like Samantha.

"It's Sam," Cindy told Mrs. Heckmaster. "Somebody hit her and let all the cats out."

"*What?* What are you talking about?" Mrs. Heckmaster leaned

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forward, predatory, an old vulture feeding on other people's excitement. But Cindy so badly needed to talk that she stuffed her butt into one of Mrs. Heckmaster's armchairs and told her all about it.

"We got most of the cats back inside by the time I left," she concluded, "but there's a few ferals still missing. And the one with kittens."

"I thought they spaded all those useless cats."

Spayed, Cindy thought. *Or neutered.* "They do. But Queenie was knocked up when she came." Yet another dumped pet. People like Mrs. Heckmaster thought they should be killed. They didn't understand.

"And the doctors think that sentimental fool Samantha is going to be all right?"

"That's what I heard." According to one of the volunteers, the doctors were keeping Samantha in a coma until her brain swelling went down.

Mrs. Heckmaster returned her attention to the memory book she was working on, a gift for her daughter, featuring news clippings about Devon's honors at various cat shows. Devon was a cat fancier who raised American Curls, which was a weird new breed of cats with the ears bent over backwards. Cindy vaguely remembered hearing Devon talk about how the breed started with a mutation, like all those woolly Rex cats and those ugly hairless Sphinx ones and some others Cindy couldn't remember. But Devon knew all about them. Which kind of explained her involvement in the cat rescue . . . no, it didn't. None of the other cat fanciers seemed to give a doo-diddle-dah about the strays Samantha took in.

"Do they know who hurt her?" Mrs. Heckmaster asked.

Cindy shook her head, silent, thinking about the disabled girl; could she have hit Samantha, maybe not understanding the consequences? Or what about that one male volunteer, so silent, so expressionless?

"I bet it's got something to do with her being light in her loafers," said Mrs. Heckmaster with relish.

Good Lord, the old biddy reasoned just like the cops. Cindy got up to fetch Mrs. Heckmaster's bedtime meds, and as soon as her back was turned, she rolled her eyes.

Ten minutes before visiting hours the next day, Cindy lumbered into the hospital Ladies' Auxiliary Gift Shop.

"Why, hello, Cindy," said a familiar voice. "Have you come to see Samantha?"

Cindy blinked at Devon, who was speaking to her from behind the counter. Devon, with sleek blond hair that had never been flattened by a scarf, every curl in place. Devon, so slim she made Cindy

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feel like a garbage can on feet. Devon, in a sage green wool dress so simple it must have cost five times what Cindy made in a week.

Cindy blurted, "I didn't know you worked here!"

"I *volunteer* here. I like to volunteer," said Devon with a little too much emphasis.

"Maybe you've heard, how's Samantha doing?"

"They say she's stable." Whatever that meant. "Did you want something to take to her?"

Cindy looked around the shop at pretty, useless stuff that made her yearn to have money: silk pansies in hand-painted country flowerpots, votive candles in cut-glass holders, miniature stuffed animals, winsome crockery kittens and puppies holding "Get Well" signs. Stalling for time, she asked, "Is she still in the coma, or did she wake up?"

"I wouldn't know. I haven't been to see her yet."

"Devon," called a woman from the shop's back room, phone in hand, "I've got a delivery order, huggy bear with daisies to Room Four-oh-two."

"I'll take it up in a minute."

Cindy wanted to get Sam a get-well kitten, but they were too expensive. She settled for a pansy pot ("Pansies Are for Thoughts") and headed off to find Samantha.

Eventually she located the room on a busy hallway with nurses rushing up and down. Sam's door was closed, which might mean the doctor was in there, or maybe they were giving her a bath. Cindy waited awhile, but nobody came out. She knocked. Got no answer. She hesitated, then turned the knob and pushed the door open softly in case Sam was sleeping.

Afterward, she wondered whether she didn't have a premonition or something. But she didn't. Not an inkling.

She saw the pillow first. And fanning out from underneath it, caramel-colored spiral curls. Sam's hair.

Then she saw Sam's hand. Denim blue.

She screamed.

A nurse came running, pushed past her, made an unprofessional sound, and rushed to lift the pillow from—from Samantha's face, very still, blue like Lake Placid. After that, Cindy didn't notice much. Nurses and doctors swept in and out, but Cindy stood where she was and stared at that blue face nested in spiral curls amid the bitterly bright room rife with get-well cards, bouquets of flowers, a knickknack on the bedside table. . . .

Eventually someone led her away to an office, where she sat. Time passed. She didn't notice.

"You again," said a male voice.

Cindy blinked and focused on the tall detective sitting across a desk from her.

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"You found her," he said. "Again."

Cindy whispered, "She's dead."

"Yes, she is. Somebody finished the job. And I just have to wonder whether it's a coincidence, your being here."

Cindy didn't react. One good thing about being big was it helped her look stolid. She had a lot of inertia.

"Somebody smothered her and left the pillow in place," the detective said, watching her. "Might be some sort of kinky sex thing."

Cindy shook her head. Her thoughts had begun to move again, slowly but surely, like deep water. She blurted, "Did you get any prints off that cat statue they clubbed her with?"

The detective gave her a blank look. "I couldn't say."

This meant "No," Cindy reasoned, or he'd be inking her fingers this minute. "They wore gloves, right? Can you tell whether it was rubber gloves?"

He peered. "What makes you ask that?"

"One of those ceramic get-well kittens. In Sam's room. Who *brought it up from the gift shop*?"

But it was ridiculous to suspect Devon, Cindy scolded herself as she drove toward the S.P.C.A. What possible motive could Devon have to kill Samantha? Still, Cindy felt agitated enough to double as a washing machine. With no idea what to think, she trudged into the S.P.C.A. for her weekly volunteer stint, wheeled the mop out, and started to scrub, hoping the drudge work would calm her down.

Working her way between ranks of pens and cages, she patted the yipping dogs and mewling cats, but without feeling. Just reflex. When a little gray tabby rubbed its side against the woven wire, imploring, Cindy raised her hand automatically before several small fluffy movements caught her eye—

She squealed like an elephant. "Queenie!" she shrieked.

Queenie answered with a feline trill. It was the lost kitty, all right, complete with her litter of weanling kittens, their baby fur starting to grow out. "Queenie, you never told me your boyfriend was a *longhair*," Cindy cooed, because the kittens were turning into puffballs.

Footsteps pounded up the aisle. Cindy's screech had brought the manager running from the front desk.

"What's Queenie doing here?" Cindy demanded, turning on the woman as if it were her fault that Samantha's shelter was thirty miles away, in the next county, for God's sake.

"The little mama cat? Dumped," the woman said with fervid scorn. "That country-clubber could certainly have afforded to make a donation, but noooo, dump and run."

Cindy felt something like a giant fist squeeze her chest, making it hard to breathe. She could force out only a couple of words. "Country-clubber?"

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"Yeah, yesterday morning, before we opened. I came in early, saw her hustling away. Blonde in a tennis outfit."

Cindy managed another few words. "Was she driving?"

"Sure. Shiny new car, red and white."

"A Beemer?" Devon's red convertible had a white ragtop.

"Heck, I don't know one car from another. Show me a dog, I know dogs."

It was ridiculous anyway. How would Devon have gotten hold of Queenie and the kittens? And what for? And why wouldn't she have said something? It was all nonsense. Cindy turned back to patting the little tabby and her adorable fluffy kittens. . . .

"So you know this mama cat?" the manager asked.

Intent on the kittens, Cindy didn't answer. One kitten, two, three, four, five. . . . "Where's the sixth one?" she demanded.

"She came with five. Phone's ringing." The woman ran to answer it.

Cindy closed her eyes a moment, visualizing Queenie's litter. Two tabbies, gray, like Queenie. Two spotted kittens. A black one with a white tuxedo bib. And the pure white one with the funny-looking fur.

She opened her eyes. It was the white kitten that was gone.

It had died in the cold, probably. Or Queenie had somehow lost track of it and left it behind. Or it could have been dropped out of the box. Any number of things could have happened to it, and there was no use wondering about it, was there?

At nine o'clock that night, wearing a black top and black slacks, Cindy approached Devon's stately residence on foot, having parked her rusting Pinto on the next cul-de-sac over. Just as Mrs. Heckmaster lived in the best old section of town, Devon lived in the best new one, in a modernistic dwelling about the size of a Gold's Gymnasium. Getting in would be no problem. Mrs. Heckmaster had keys, and Cindy had appropriated them. On the key chain was a laminated card with the numbers for the security system. And this was Devon's night for modern-dance class. Cindy foresaw no difficulties.

Just the same, she sweated as she unlocked a back door, silenced the alarm system, and slipped into the house through the garage.

She listened, and heard only a meow. She clicked on her flashlight and found herself in an immaculate back hallway the size of some people's apartments, with several cats padding to meet her. Why in the world—oh. Duh, they were American Curls, that was why their ears were inside out. Stupid-looking, but they couldn't help it. Cindy whispered to them, "Where's the kitten, guys?" She had tried to tell the detectives about her suspicions, but had succeeded only in making them look at her as if she had sprouted several extra heads. Jerks.

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Silently, like the cats, Cindy padded to the first door and cautiously opened it. Just a storage room. Okay, onward to the next door . . . Bingo. Cindy surveyed Devon's luxurious cattery, thickly carpeted, with scratching posts and climbing apparatus and a row of frilled, curtained cages for cat shows. From one of them sounded a meow as tiny as the piping of a nestling wren.

Cindy smiled, folded to her knees, opened the cage door, and reached in past the porcelain litter pan to the miniature canopied bed. From atop a silk pillow she lifted the kitten.

"Well, hi, little fellow," she whispered, holding him in her lap as she shone the flashlight on him. He gazed back at her with unblinking blue eyes beneath white JonBenet curls—curls! Cindy gasped. All over the kitten's petite body, the new hair was growing out in long, soft curls worthy of Barbie at her prime, curls that made even Cindy's chapped hands itch for a comb and some ribbons and barrettes.

"Oh," she whispered, "you *angel.*" With snowy little-girl curls, Shirley Temple curls, fashion-model movie-star all-American curls. "*Pretty* boy!"

Click went the light switch, the ceiling fixture blazed on, and Cindy jumped so hard she dropped her flashlight. There in the doorway stood Devon, exquisite in mauve silk pajamas, with quite a large carving knife in her hand.

Devon, with a look in her eyes fit to curl Cindy's very commonplace hair. Cindy knew she should be afraid, very afraid. But her wonder at the white kitten overrode her fear. She blurted, "He's a mutation, isn't he?"

Devon's lips twitched in a grimace too cold to be called a smile. "Imagine how much money people will pay," she said, "for a new breed of pretty kitty with long, silky, naturally curly hair."

An explosive mix of emotions lifted Cindy to her feet. "Is *that* what you killed Samantha for?" she cried.

"I never meant to hurt her! I just told her I wanted the kitten, and she got stupid about it."

A number of sleek cats with backward-tipped ears seated themselves on the cages as if on bleachers, watching. Devon advanced a step.

Keep her talking. Trying to think what to do, Cindy became polite and conversational. "Samantha knew this kitten was valuable?"

"No, she just wanted to keep him. The fool. I even offered to pay her for him." Devon's voice went squeaky-shrill. "And she said no. After all the work I'd done for her stinking shelter! I lost my temper." Devon said this with a certain pride. "I thought I'd killed her."

Forget politeness. "Well, you did now, didn't you?"

Devon just showed her teeth. "What do you think?"

"I think you're a murderer." Holding the kitten gently even

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though her hands wanted to clench into fists, somehow Cindy found murder easier to accept than . . . "Did you *have* to put the cats out in the cold?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course I did. So no one would know I took one." Devon raised her knife. "Stick that kitten in his cage."

"No." As she said it, Cindy felt her sweat start to run cold.

"You always were a stupid lardass." Slowly, watching her fixedly, Devon advanced.

Devon in her mauve silk peejays, planning to spill her blood all over the thick cream-colored carpet. Sweating, Cindy blurted, "You're going to make an awful mess."

"So who's ever going to look?" Devon took another step toward her.

"I made substitutions in your mother's medicines." Cindy wished this were not a lie. "If you don't get back there before she goes to bed, you're going to have a very sick mother. She might even die."

Devon paused, considering, then paced forward again. "So let her die."

Cindy lifted the white kitten in both shaking hands. "If you take one more step, I'll wring his neck."

But Devon gave a cold bark of laughter. "Bull. You're an overstuffed cream puff."

One more step put her almost within arm's reach of Cindy.

"Here. Catch!" Cindy tossed the kitten at her. Devon squeaked, grabbing for the baby reflexively, and Cindy bent over and lunged to head-ram Devon just below the ribs with all the force of her way-too-many pounds.

She flattened Devon, fell on top of her, and lay there panting, mostly with relief that she did not feel any knife sticking into her. There it was, lying on the carpet several feet away. Cindy started to shake, but that was okay. She closed her eyes, taking time to recover, to think what to do next. Under her, enveloped by her, Devon struggled briefly, then apparently decided it was no use and lay still. In order to restrain Devon, all Cindy had to do was remain lying on top of her. Overweight had its advantages.

She lay catching her breath a few more minutes before something wet and raspy massaged her face. One of the cats was licking her. . . . Oh God, where was the kitten? Was it all right?

Cindy opened her eyes, took a look around, and there was the white kitten, just fine, batting at the carving knife's shiny blade.

"Stop that. You'll hurt yourself," Cindy muttered, knowing she should get up and take possession of the knife.

But she still felt shaky. That and inertia kept her where she was. Even the sound of running footsteps in the hallway didn't budge her.

A pair of battered brogans appeared in the doorway below rumpled khakis. Suddenly lighthearted, Cindy heaved herself up to stand facing the tall detective.

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He waved her to one side. In his other hand he held his pistol at the ready. "Tailed you," he explained while never taking his eyes from Devon. "Heard most of it from outside the window." He ordered Devon, "Ms. Heckmaster, clasp your hands on top of your head!"

Devon did not respond, just lay still. Very, very still. Staring blankly at the ceiling.

Cindy started to shake again. "I knocked the breath out of her," she murmured, "then lay on top of her . . . oh my God."

The white kitten bounded over to Devon and pounced on her trailing blond hair. He clutched her golden locks in his tiny paws, then climbed her head to prance on her face. He batted at her motionless eyebrows, lost his balance, and sat his furry little butt on her nose. He piped a soprano meow. From atop Devon's corpse he gazed at the world he was born to conquer, his wide blue eyes haloed by angelic curls. ●

"I wish that joint would go out of business!"

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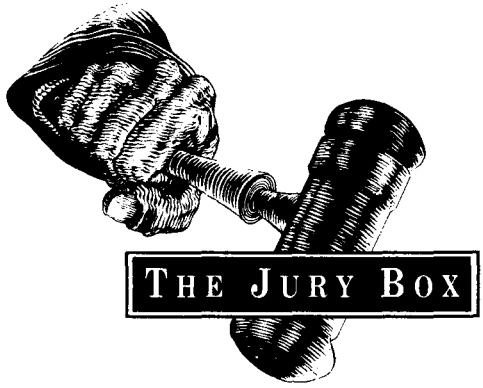

by Jon L. Breen

A major American launch for Ken Bruen's distinctively highbrow-cum-lowbrow (no middlebrow) crime thrillers may have been delayed because he writes very short books in a time of inflated blockbusters. The big push, complete with appreciative quotes from T. Jefferson Parker, James Crumley, and others, finally comes for a novel of over 300 pages, albeit in the same rhythmic, economical style, with plenty of white space. The minimalist Bruen is not for everybody—some may grow impatient with his thin plots and incessant literary references. I find his writing hypnotic and irresistible.

**** Ken Bruen: *The Guards,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. In Galway, alcoholic ex-cop Jack Taylor, a typically literature-obsessed protagonist, turns private eye when asked to prove his client's daughter, one of a series of teenage drownings, did not commit suicide. Well-calculated surprises apart, Jack's struggles with the demons of drink and his violent past power the story. For more Bruen, seek out a new publisher's trade paperback of *The White Trilogy* (Justin, Charles, $14.95), three unconventional police procedurals reviewed here individually in past columns.

**** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *Not Quite Kosher,* Forge, $23.95. One hapless jewel robber, who devoted two years in prison to reading the classics, commits enough literary references for a Bruen character, but Kaminsky's easygoing, humorous style is otherwise quite different. Veteran Chicago cop Abe Lieberman, whether viewed on the job, on a synagogue committee, or in his family circle, is one of the most engaging, unpredictable, and fully realized characters in all of detective fiction.

**** Max Allan Collins: *The Lusitania Murders,* Berkley, $6.99. S.S. Van Dine narrates (complete with footnotes) his 1915 voyage on the ill-fated luxury liner, where he joins an unlikely model for Philo Vance

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in solving a series of murders among the first-class passengers, including (most memorably) the populist aphorism-spouter Elbert Hubbard. For all the merits of his Nate Heller series, Collins's 20th-century disaster mysteries may be an even finer achievement.

**** Richard Stark: *Breakout,* Mysterious, $23.95. Following their jailbreak, Parker agrees (against his better judgment) to join a fellow career criminal in the elaborate, seemingly impossible burglary of a jewelry wholesaler. Providing unrelenting suspense and devious plot twists, caper-master Stark (a.k.a. Donald E. Westlake) is at the top of his game.

*** Christianna Brand: *The Spotted Cat and Other Mysteries from Inspector Cockrill's Casebook,* Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper. That Brand (1907-1988) was a rich stylist and puzzle-spinner in a class with Queen and Carr is shown in nine short stories (six from *EQMM*). The title piece, an unproduced and previously unpublished three-act play she was wise to abandon, is interesting reading but far from the stagecraft of Agatha Christie. Also included are a scholarly biographical introduction by Tony Medawar and a checklist of all the Cockrill novels and stories, plus tantalizing descriptions of Brand mysteries still unpublished.

*** K.K. Beck: *The Tell-Tale Tattoo and Other Stories,* Five Star, $25.95. Three lighthearted short stories about 1920s flapper Iris Cooper, plus the much darker contemporary tale "Rule of Law," precede the 1989 Cooper novel *Peril Under the Palms.* The collection offers charm, humor, and clued detection. (The tattoo on the jacket is nothing like the one in the title story but undoubtedly more photogenic.)

*** Sue Grafton: *"Q" Is for Quarry,* Putnam, $26.95. In a fictionalized version of an unsolved Santa Barbara case, Kinsey Millhone helps two aging and ailing cops (great characters both) reopen the twenty-year-old investigation of a Jane Doe found murdered in a quarry in 1969. Plotting and writing are reliably strong. It's overlong, to be sure, but Grafton pioneered the no-move-unreported method and practices it better than nearly anyone else. (Also recommended is the audio abridgement [Random House, $25.95 cassette; $29.95 CD], with an impressive range of vocal characterizations by Judy Kaye and enough extraneous detail to let you know it's Grafton.)

*** Michael Connelly: *Chasing the Dime,* Little, Brown, $25.95. Moving into a new apartment with a new phone number, molecular researcher Henry Pierce receives cryptic messages for a woman named Lilly. Finding out who she was and what happened to her becomes an obsession that threatens his life as well as his cutting-edge technology company. The combination of Henry's amateur detective

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work and business concerns spells compulsive reading.

*** Anne Perry: *Seven Dials,* Ballantine, $25.95. The scandalous death of a diplomat found in a wheelbarrow propelled by a cabinet minister's Egyptian mistress begins another solid entry in the consistently enjoyable series about 1890s London sleuth Thomas Pitt, wife Charlotte, and their extended family.

*** Deborah Donnelly: *Died to Match,* Dell, $5.99. The second adventure of Seattle wedding planner Carnegie Kincaid offers droll humor, interesting background, cunning whodunit misdirection, and what amateur-detective cozies so often lack: real detection from fairly presented clues. The downsides—excessive length, mid-novel sag, and the heroine's exasperating love life—are easily forgiven.

** Edna Buchanan: *The Ice Maiden,* Morrow, $23.95. In the latest about Miami crime reporter Britt Montero, the tantalizing predicament of a frequently-victimized merchant, charged with murder when his booby trap electrocutes a burglar, leads to the reopening of an unsolved rape-murder of years before. Apart from the lack of fair-play clues, there's much to admire in the intricate plotting, but Buchanan carries to an extreme the soap-opera interruptions and gratuitous piling on of the miseries—one clumsily handled misfortune for a secondary character you'll see coming pages away.

Craig Rice's famous 1944 novel *Home Sweet Homicide* (Rue Morgue, $14.95), though not quite the classic its Haycraft-Queen Cornerstone status would suggest, is an enjoyable domestic comedy/mystery in which a widowed mystery writer's three children play both Cupid and detective. Tom and Enid Schantz provide an informative introduction.

Raymond Chandler's *Collected Stories* (Everyman/Knopf, $27.50) gathers all his short fiction in a single volume for the first time and sports a substantial introduction by John Bayley, who likens Philip Marlowe's creator to Doyle, Wodehouse, and Ian Fleming as well as usual suspects Hammett and Ross Macdonald.

Most Wanted (Signet, $6.50), edited by Robert J. Randisi, gathers stories from an impressive roster: the past and current presidents of Private Eye Writers of America. Most are reprints, but there are good new cases for Bill Pronzini's Nameless, John Lutz's Nudger, and Parnell Hall's Stanley Hastings, plus a 9/11-related original by Jeremiah Healy.

If you get a nostalgic twinge from names like Michael Avallone, Dan Sontup, Morris Hershman (a.k.a. Arnold English), and other contributors to the 1950s digest *Manhunt* and its imitators, you'll enjoy editor Gary Lovisi's new anthology *Pulp Crime Classics* (Gryphon, $20), 13 stories not from the top drawer but fun nevertheless.

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Art by Mark Evans

The Hell Book

by Percy Spurlark Parker

Big Bull Benson was just getting into the newspaper's account of Rick "The Pick" Calini's death when the phone rang. "The Pick" was the last of the city's reputed old-time crime lords. Bull had been wanting to get the details of his heart attack since he first heard the news this morning, but the phone persisted. He tossed the paper aside and reached for the receiver, irritated at the interruption.

"Yeah?"

"Unk'l Bull?" A child's voice, laced with tears.

He ran through the list of his nieces and nephews; they were all older, the youngest in his mid teens.

"They killed her, Unk'l Bull. I heard her scream. They killed her dead."

"Take it easy, now. Who got killed?"

"My mommy, Unk'l Bull, Jadean."

For a moment everything seemed to get perfectly still. Until five years ago, Jadean had been the short-order cook at the Bull Pen, the bar-and-grill that took up most of the first floor of the Benson

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Hotel. She'd quit to have her baby, but filled in every now and then when he needed a hand.

"Jasmin, is that you, honey?"

"Uh-huh. Mommy said to call you if anything ever happened to her."

"Where's your daddy?"

"I don't know. He's not home."

Darrin Seasons had stepped forward with a wedding ring when Jadean learned she was pregnant. It was a good first step. Bull had hoped the responsibility of becoming a family man was the push Darrin needed to get his life in order. It had always been an up-and-down issue at best.

"Where are you, honey?"

"Under the bed in my room."

"Where's Mommy?"

"In the kitchen."

"Are the people who hurt her still there?"

"No."

Bull felt his heart begin to pump a little slower as a wave of relief washed over him. "Okay, honey. Try not to be scared."

"I'll try, but . . ." The small voice seemed to grow smaller.

"I know, I know, honey. Just stay where you are, I'll be right over."

"Okay, but hurry. Pretty please."

He didn't tell anyone at the bar he was leaving, only taking time to pull Jadean's card out of his Rolodex before going out the hotel's back exit. He knew where she lived, but the cops needed exact addresses. He did the 911 with his cell phone as he drove his Caddy onto the street. Somebody blasted their horn behind him but he kept going. Unless he heard a siren he wasn't about to stop.

She lived about twenty blocks southeast of his hotel, in a complex of single-family prefabs the city had thrown together for low-income housing. They were all two-story drab white cubes, with their shingles being the only differentiating point. Browns and greens were the two prevailing earth tones, with every now and then something that passed as rust. The contractors had dubbed the place Peach Gardens. Bull never heard a good explanation

Percy Spurlark Parker's Big Bull Benson is a character who cries out for a novel. A product of Chicago's mean streets who has managed to cultivate a soft side, Bull runs a bar-and-grill and hotel and solves cases into which he is often drawn unwillingly by cops who can't resist trying to tap his knowledge. Bull's new case for us is a strong entry in the series. His creator, Mr. Parker, no longer lives in Chicago but he hasn't lost his sense of how the city works. ¶

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why. There wasn't a peach tree or a garden anywhere in the place.

He made good time, thanks to a few green lights he was able to catch, and a couple of red ones he managed to squeeze through. First right turn into the complex, one block over, third house from the corner; he could still remember the instructions Jadean had given him when she'd invited him to the housewarming party. He pulled into the small driveway, jumping out while the Caddy was still coming to a rocking halt.

The front door was ajar and he didn't hesitate going in, calling Jasmin's name out loud. She appeared at the head of the stairs and they met midway, her small body clinging to him as she began to cry.

"I tried not to, but I'm real scared, Unk'l Bull."

"That's all right, baby," he said, patting her on her back. "I'm here now. Everything's going to be all right."

He held her a little longer, feeling her tremors start to subside, then sat her on the steps. Jasmin had always favored Jadean, the same dark complexion, the same large brown eyes, the same wealth of hair. But the eyes were still filled with tears now, and two or three barrettes hung loosely from her thick braids.

"You stay right here, honey. I've got to go see about your mom."

She wiped at her eyes, held back a sniffle, and nodded an okay.

He blew her a kiss and backed down the stairs.

He found Jadean on the floor in the kitchen, on her back next to the stove, a splash of blood on the floor by her head. He knelt down, felt her neck for a pulse. It was weak, but there was one.

"Hold it right there, asshole."

He didn't have to turn around to know there were cops behind him with drawn guns. The scenario had repeated itself a number of times in his life, from the black kid running the streets he'd once been to the fifty-something adult he'd now become.

"Take it easy," he said, gradually looking over his shoulder at the two uniformed cops who stood just inside the kitchen, guns held with both hands in a firing stance. "I'm one of the good guys. I put the call in to you."

"Sure you did. Get your goddamn hands up."

The cops were both white, the one doing the talking younger and paler with faint reddish eyebrows.

He raised his hands slowly. They didn't need much of an excuse to fire their weapons and he wasn't about to give them one.

"Just hurry with whatever you're going to do, okay. This woman needs a doctor."

"Knock 'em around and then you get concerned. You guys make me sick."

"Get to your feet and back up toward us." It was the other cop

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giving the orders now, his words not as harsh as his partner's but his tone just as threatening.

Bull did as he was instructed, only to be grabbed by the back of his collar and pushed face-first into the kitchen wall, the business end of the cop's automatic pressed against the base of his skull.

Jasmin came into the kitchen as the cops were cuffing his hands behind him.

"Unk'l Bull, Unk'l Bull," she cried out, grabbing onto his leg.

"Come on, kid, get away from the bad man," the younger cop said.

He tried to pull her free but she started screaming and crying louder.

"Leave her alone," Bull snapped. He'd tried to keep his cool. The sooner they finished playing with him, the sooner Jadean would get some help. But the young cop had just about stepped on his last nerve. He was younger than Bull, and strong, but Bull was bigger, and felt he was just as strong if not stronger. Maybe they'd meet one day when the cop wasn't on duty. He knew the chances of that happening were slight, but at least he felt a little better thinking about it.

Otis Appleby and Casey Gates, a black and white detective team from the Moore Street Precinct, came in right behind the paramedics. Otis, the white one, had more gut than hair and was less than three months away from retirement. Casey, the taller of the two, had already made preliminary plans with Bull about throwing the retirement bash at the Bull Pen.

"Who cuffed this man?" Otis barked.

"I did," the young cop replied.

"Well, take 'em off."

"Hell, we found him kneeling over the body."

"Uncuff him," Otis said, slower and more even in tone this time, but as cold as a January day on the lakefront.

The cop mumbled something to himself but came over and unlocked the cuffs.

"Thanks," Bull said, rubbing his wrists. They never seemed to make those things large enough for him.

"What the hell happened here, Bull?"

"I'm not sure," he said. Jasmin was still clinging to his leg. He bent down, picking her up, and she immediately wrapped her arms around his neck and began to cry.

It took another twenty minutes to calm Jasmin down and run through events with the two detectives. "Two white men," was the only description Jasmin could give of the men who'd broken into her home, and there was still a big question mark as to the whereabouts of her father. One thing Jasmin did know, however, was

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phone numbers. Besides Bull's, she also knew her aunt Rayann's number. Bull used his cell to call, and asked Rayann to met him at the hospital where the paramedics had taken Jadean.

Appleby rode with him and Jasmin to the hospital with Gates following.

"Regulations," Appleby explained his hitching a ride with Bull. "I can't just let you take the victim's daughter off on your own."

Bull didn't have any argument with the arrangement; it gave him the opportunity to toss a few ideas around. "Naturally they weren't locals."

"Agreed," Appleby said from the backseat. "Two white guys break in and rough up a black woman in a predominantly black housing complex. Somebody had to've seen something. There's a unit canvassing the neighborhood now."

"Whatever it is, I can't see Jadean being the cause of it."

"I'm listening."

"My money's on Darrin," Bull said, reaching over to Jasmin, who was strapped in next to him, and giving her a reassuring pat on the head.

They'd batted Darrin's name around back at the house as the paramedics loaded Jadean into the ambulance. Appleby and Gates knew Jadean slightly from her job at the Bull Pen. Darrin they were more familiar with, running across him from time to time over the years. "So, what d'you think he's into?"

"Knowing Darrin, it could be any number of things," Bull said, then: "Jasmin, honey, did your mom say where your daddy was?"

"No," the tiny voice answered.

"Think they were looking for him?" Appleby asked.

"It's an easy enough guess. Jadean didn't know or didn't tell. The questioning got a little too heavy and . . ."

"Maybe she knew and told," Appleby said.

It was a scenario that hadn't entered Bull's mind. After all this time, Jadean knew what Darrin was about, knew he flirted with the law. She'd stayed with him. It was reasonable to believe she knew about some of his dealings. If not from the beginnings, somewhere along the way.

Rayann arrived at the hospital shortly after they did. Jasmin ran to her right away.

"Bull, how is she?"

"We don't know yet," he said.

They were in the emergency waiting room, a large bright room in spite of its off-white walls. It was a busy place; some patients were taken directly through the large swinging doors into the emergency room itself while others were made to wait and fill out insurance forms.

Jadean and Rayann both had slight overbites. That's where the

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family resemblance began and ended. Rayann was older, taller, and bigger-boned. She'd been married once. Her husband had died in a construction-site accident when she was pregnant with their third child. The local state senator was an ambulance chaser back then and he'd gotten the construction company to cough up a pretty hefty settlement. Now the child Rayann had been carrying then was in his early teens and she owned a temp agency.

"Has Darrin shown up?" Rayann asked, holding Jasmin in her arms and gently rubbing her back.

"I was going to ask you that very question," Appleby said, stepping up to them.

Bull introduced him, and with a nod Appleby did the same for Gates, who was standing behind him.

"I spoke to Darrin yesterday," she said. "Diamond Caterers were short two waiters for an affair they were working last night. I threw a job his way from time to time. Helped him stay on top of the mortgage note."

"Did he show for the job?" Gates asked.

Rayann nodded. "I called Diamond first thing this morning, after Jadean called me. He showed for the gig, but he didn't come home last night. I called her back and told her, tried to get her not to worry. He's stayed out before." She paused. "He didn't do this to Jadean, did he?"

"No, he didn't do it," Bull answered. "But that's the only thing anyone's sure of right now."

A doctor stepped out of the emergency room, called out Jadean's name, then came over to the group after Bull waved to him. Jadean was still unconscious. X-rays showed she'd suffered a concussion but there was no swelling and therefore no immediate plans to operate.

"These things can be tricky," the doctor continued. "She can come out of it at any time, or it might take a day or two. Granted, the longer she's unconscious the more apprehensive I'll be, but right now I'm not expecting any major problems. You can wait here if you like, but probably the best thing to do is to go home. We'll keep a close watch, and let you know as soon as there's any change."

There was nothing for them to do but take the doctor's advice. Rayann wanted to stay but she knew Jasmin would be better off at her home than hanging around the hospital. Appleby and Gates had other cases to work, and Bull had done about as much as he thought he could do.

He explained it all to Sam Devlin once he got back to the Bull Pen.

"I was wonderin' where ya ran off ta," Sam said, the ever-present toothpick stuck in the corner of his mouth.

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"Sorry. When Jasmin called, I didn't think about anything but getting to her."

"Understood," Sam said with a nod of his bald dome. He was behind the bar. He grabbed a bottle of Grand-Dad and a shot glass, sat them on the counter in front of Bull, and poured him a drink.

There was a time when Sam's long dark fingers could work miracles with a deck of cards or a pair of dice, back when Bull was in his teens and Sam had taken him under his wing. But the years were treating Sam pretty harsh of late. Now he could hardly pour a drink without spilling a drop or two.

Bull downed the bourbon in one gulp and Sam poured him another, hitting the counter first before he made it into the glass. If Sam emptied the whole bottle to get one shot glass full it was okay with Bull. Sam couldn't make any mistakes as far as he was concerned. Sam's job at the Bull Pen was never a real job anyway. It was more of a payback. A debt owed that was nowhere close to being fulfilled.

"Sure hope that little gal comes out okay. Always liked her."

"You and me both, Sam."

Sam started to pour him another drink but Bull waved him off.

"Say, did ya hear 'bout The Pick? He finally kicked the bucket."

"Yeah, I was reading about it this morning when Jasmin called."

"Something, huh? Kicks off last night right after his birthday party. At least he made it to ninety-one. Outlived a hell of a lot of his associates."

"I bet there's a bunch of folks saying it's about time," Bull offered.

Rick "The Pick" Calini, the last of the boss of bosses, although he hadn't been in control of much for a number of years. There was no one person that everyone took orders from nowadays, but rather a number of different groups that coexisted without the bodies piling up too high.

The Pick's empire had started to crumble about twenty or twenty-five years ago. Gang war had broken the hold he had on the other families. His son, who was thought to be his heir apparent, was one of the first casualties. Now his grandson, Troy, was controlling what portion of mobdom the family had left, and it was rumored The Pick was bordering on senility.

"Sat 'cross from him at a poker game once," Sam said, beaming. "Cleaned his clock good. Lot of folks would've been a'scared ta whip 'im. Not me. Never shared a table with 'im but that one time, though."

Bull had heard the story from Sam at least a dozen times before in varying details. He didn't try to stop the latest rehashing, simply enjoyed the moment with him.

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He got the call from Rayann about an hour after his return to his hotel.

"Darrin just called me," she said.

"Where is he?"

"On his way over."

"Does he know about Jadean?"

"He said he went home and one of their neighbors told him she'd been taken away in an ambulance. I told him the rest. . . . Bull, should I call the police?"

"They want to talk to him, although all we know for sure is he didn't come home last night."

"Guess they can't jail him for that."

"No, they can't. But I'd lay money he's the cause of Jadean being in the hospital. Maybe I'd better talk to him first."

"Would you, Bull? I think I'd feel better if you were here."

Rayann lived about the same distance from him as Jadean did, but west of the hotel. He didn't break any sound barriers getting there, her call not being as urgent as Jasmin's had been.

" 'Lo, Bull," Darrin said as Rayann led him into the kitchen. He was sitting at the kitchen table with Jasmin in his lap, a cup of coffee in front of him.

Bull sat across from him and waved off the coffee Rayann offered. She refreshed her own cup and sat at the end of the table on his right.

"What's this all about, Darrin?"

He shrugged. "What d'you mean?"

Darrin Seasons had broad shoulders and a very definite Adam's apple that bobbed as he spoke. His heavy moustache contrasted with his thin eyebrows and close-cut hairstyle. Jasmin sat contented in his lap. A part of her life had been ripped away from her today, but now she sat with her father's protective arms around her.

Bull wanted to reach across the table and squeeze Darrin's Adam's apple until it burst. But he remained calm and simply said, "You're lying."

"I don't appreciate you talking to me like that, Bull. I hung out with the fellows last night, come home to find my wife has been taken to the hospital. I call Rayann and she tells me Jadean's in a coma. So I rush over here to be with my daughter. I ask you, what have I done wrong?"

"You've got the answer to that one."

"Nothing," Darrin said, not letting Bull's statement stay out there very long.

"Where were you last night?"

"Just out with some dudes I know," Darrin said, with just the slightest bit of hesitation this time.

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"I thought talking to me would be easier for you than talking to the cops. Rayann, call Moore Street, ask for Detective Gates or Appleby."

Rayann made a move to stand.

"Hold on," Darrin said. He cradled Jasmin in his arms, looked from Rayann to Bull. "Can we talk privately, Bull?"

"Knock yourselves out," Rayann said, getting to her feet.

Darrin kissed Jasmin on her cheek, passed her over to Rayann.

"I'm listening," Bull said when they were alone.

Darrin looked over his shoulder once more. "I didn't want to say anything with Rayann in the room; she might not understand, especially with her being Jadean's sister."

"You weren't with the fellows last night."

"That obvious?"

"Pretty much so. Who is she?"

"One of the waitresses with the catering service Rayann hooked me up with. We got to talking. I went home with her when the gig was over last night."

"She got a name?"

"Yeah, Carol . . . somethin'." He grinned.

It was a small table, so Bull's fist didn't have to travel far. It was a solid left that smashed into Darrin's chest, knocking him out of the chair.

"Damn, Bull . . . what'd you do that for?" Darrin coughed, rubbing his chest as he lay on the floor.

"Two white guys put your wife in the hospital and you're giving it about as much concern as if you'd broken a shoelace."

"Naw, naw. That ain't it, man." Darrin sat up, still holding his chest. "She's in a coma, right? What the hell can I do about that?"

"You can start with the truth."

"I told you the truth."

"Not half-truths. Those men were there because of you. . . . Why?"

Darrin slowly got to his feet. "I'm always the bad guy, right? Why couldn't it be Jadean brought this on herself?"

Bull started around the table. "Yeah, just like you bringing this on yourself."

"Hang on, Bull," Darrin said, backing up, hands meekly going to a fighting stance.

Rayann returned, stopped abruptly, looked from one to the other. "I didn't expect you to start using my kitchen for a boxing ring, Bull."

"We're just talkin'."

"Like hell you are."

"No lie. Darrin's trying to convince me this whole thing is Jadean's fault."

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"I guess Manny Wells is her fault, too?"

The name was a new one to Bull. It must have shown on his face because Rayann directed her explanation to him.

"He owned the catering service Darrin worked for last night. I just saw it on the TV. His body was found in his office . . . somebody beat him to death. It must have happened right after I spoke to him this morning."

Darrin dropped his hands to his sides. He leaned back on the kitchen wall shaking his head.

"What about it, Darrin?"

Darrin wouldn't look at him directly. He took a deep breath, cursed, reached into his jacket pocket, and tossed a black notebook onto the kitchen table.

"That's what they're looking for."

Bull retrieved the book from the tabletop. A ragged, uneven scrawl filled every page, some in ink, some in pencil. He recognized a few names, old-time mob figures, but that was all he could make out. Other than "lasagna" and one or two other choice dishes, he'd never learned to read Italian.

"Let me guess," Bull said. "The gig last night. . . . Rick Calini's birthday party?"

Darrin nodded, his thin eyebrows knotting slightly. "He got pretty smashed last night. Said something like . . . he didn't have much longer but he was going to be remembered long after he was gone when people got a look at his memoirs. He even waved this around a couple of times for folks to see."

"How did you get your hands on it?"

"His grandson asked me to help the old man up to his room."

"Troy Calini?"

Darrin shrugged. "I guess so, I don't know for sure. He was the one everyone took orders from."

"And he asked you to help the old man to his room?"

"I was standing nearby, the old man was fumbling around. The grandson stuck a Jackson in my pocket and I took the old man upstairs."

"Then what happened?"

Darrin stepped back to the table, sat down. Most of the coffee had spilled out of his cup, but there was a little left. He tried it. "I got him to his room, got his jacket off, and he flopped across the bed, passed out. I was on my way out when my foot hit the book. Guess it fell when I helped him off with his jacket. I hadn't thought about taking it, but there it was. And if the old man was right about what he was saying . . . "

"You thought you might be able to make a few bucks," Bull finished the sentence.

"Well, yeah . . . guess that's about what happened."

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"How big of a damn fool do you have to be to play games with the mob?" Rayann asked. "You almost got Jadean killed, not to mention poor Manny."

Darrin shrugged again. "Hey, look, I'm sorry. I didn't think anything through, I just reacted. I knew it had all gone wrong when I saw the papers this morning about the old man being dead. When I left him, he was laying across his bed snoring."

Troy Calini had his boys out looking for The Pick's memoirs, and they weren't being very polite about it. Hell Book would be a better name for the damn thing, Bull thought, with all the hell it had caused. And he knew the only chance of putting a halt to the violence was to get the book to the police.

"They can't blame me for none of this, can they, Bull? I took the book, sure . . . but that was almost by accident."

Bull didn't respond. A petty-theft charge was possible, if Troy Calini owned up to the fact the book had belonged to his grandfather. But with all that had gone on, Calini might try to disassociate himself from the book, claiming he knew nothing about it, which would leave Darrin pretty much free and clear, from the law, anyway.

There were a number of other scenarios that crossed Bull's mind, but going to the police still remained his best option.

He'd parked across the street and two houses down from Rayann's place. At the time it was the only available spot. He and Darrin had just reached his car when a black sedan pulled up and two white dudes jumped out, leaving a third behind the wheel. The taller, sandy-haired one had thick shoulders and his partner was working on a day's growth of beard. Each held a nickel-plated .45 with the ease of someone who knew how to use it.

The shorter of the two kept them covered while the other one patted them down. He found the book on his first pass.

"This it, Gene?"

Gene took the book, glanced at it. "Yeah," he said, sticking it in his pocket. "Mo, help our guests into the car."

Bull was pushed into the back of the sedan, something striking him hard on the back of his head as he climbed in.

He was never fully out. He was conscious of city traffic melting away into countryside, of being carried-dragged-walked somewhere and strapped into a chair. He hadn't resisted, hadn't been able to get his mind or limbs together enough to react. Sam wasn't the only one getting older. Twenty years ago a blow to the head would've just gotten him mad.

When he was able to focus in on his surroundings, he found Darrin about four feet to his left, strapped to a chair also, an ugly gash over his right eye. They were in a barn, dirt floor, the late-

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afternoon sun peeking between the slats in the walls, a rich mix of hay and manure in the air.

Troy Calini stood in front of them; there were maybe six or seven others there, standing about, looking mean, but Calini took center stage. He was dapper in a gray pinstripe, white silk tie, and matching shirt. His hair was black thick curls, his eyes not quite as gray as his suit.

"Big Bull Benson." He nodded. "I've known you by your reputation for some time, Benson. Too bad you got collected with this scumbag."

"He's never been one of my favorite people," Bull admitted.

"You should've kept your distance."

The two men standing next to Calini were the two who'd accosted them on the street, and stood a good chance of being the two who'd almost killed Jadean. On closer inspection, their looks were somewhat interchangeable. They were both beefy, both squared-jawed, just one taller than the other. Bull noticed one other little difference: Mo, the taller, sandy-haired one, had a rather blank look on his face, as if thinking would take a lot of dedicated work.

Calini was holding the Hell Book. He stepped over to Darrin and back-handed him with the book across the face. Darrin cried out. Calini smiled.

"Was that necessary?" Bull asked.

"That and more," Calini said. He threw the book to the ground, a spray of dust kicking up from the impact. "My grandfather died over that piece of crap. Funny thing is, it's worthless. It's just dribble. There's not one cohesive sentence in the whole thing. Deranged writings from a deranged mind. And your buddy here killed him for it."

That brought Darrin's head up sharply. "I didn't kill nobody."

Calini back-handed him again, bare knuckles this time. "Deny it or confess, it doesn't make me any difference."

"The papers said it was a heart attack," Bull interjected.

"The county coroner's a family friend," Calini said. "Gene and Little Mo found my grandfather last night," he said, giving a nod to the two men next to him. "His neck was broken, the bedroom tossed. Your buddy's a real prize." He pulled an ice pick from his inside coat pocket. "Ever hear how my grandfather got the nickname The Pick?" He grabbed Darrin by his throat. "He liked to start with the eyes."

"Mr. Calini," Bull said, as loud and as forceful as he could. "Don't you want to be sure you got the right person?" If a puzzle comes in big chunky pieces, it's easier to put together, and the pieces to this one, at least to him, were huge.

Calini straightened. "What?"

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"You said you know my rep. Does that buy me a listen?"

Calini licked his lips, took a step back from Darrin.

"I wouldn't trust Darrin with a dime, let alone a dollar," Bull said. "But I don't believe he's capable of murder. Definitely not breaking anyone's neck."

Calini thought it over. "You got two minutes."

"Your grandfather was waving the book around last night at the party, right? He had it with him when Darrin helped him to his room. So why was the room tossed? There was no reason for Darrin to search the place. He had the book in his hot little hands a minute after he was in the room. Somebody else came looking for the book after Darrin left. They tore up the room looking for the book, probably tried to get your grandfather to tell where he put it."

"You saying it was one of the other caterers?"

"I'd look a little closer than that."

The first thing Sam had taught him about gambling was to know the odds. Back then, Sam had applied it to a deck of cards, or a pair of dice, the number of times a heavy hitter comes up to bat. It was a lesson well learned. Over the years, knowing the odds had helped Bull time and again, when he had more than just money on the table.

"I don't know how many crews you had out looking for the book. But I'm betting the dudes who did the number on the owner of the catering outfit are the same ones who roughed up Darrin's wife."

"So, what does that prove?" There was a little sneer to Calini's mouth.

Bull shrugged. "It's just a pattern. The caterer was beaten to death. Darrin's wife was worked over pretty badly. Your grandfather had his neck broken."

"You're wasting my time, Benson. Say what you got to say."

"I'm just trying to put two and two together. Who was it that found your grandfather . . . Gene and Little Mo? Was checking in on him part of their normal routine?"

"I don't like the way this is going, boss," Gene said. "Why don't you let me do this black son of a bitch?"

"We've got plenty of time for that," Calini said.

"Breaking a neck is not the most common way to kill someone," Bull continued. "I'm guessing the big boy over there, Little Mo, would make a prime candidate. But you tell me. You got someone on your payroll who enjoys the physical side of his job a little more than some of the others?"

Little Mo's blank expression was actually being filled in with a frown. Thinking was a task best left to someone else.

Apparently what Bull had said was beginning to sink in. Calini

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looked at his two henchmen for a long moment, then asked, "What about it, Mo?"

"It was an accident," Little Mo blurted out.

"Don't listen to him, boss," Gene shouted, taking a few steps back as he looked around the room to Calini's other troops.

"Gene said we better get hold of that book . . ."

"Will you shut your damn mouth!" Gene shouted.

But once started, Little Mo kept rattling on. "The Pick woke up while we was searching his room. I didn't mean to hurt him, but he said he was going to tell you . . . and Gene said to stop him, and I, well . . ."

Calini flipped the ice pick around in a throwing position but Gene got the drop on him before he could go any further. "Why don't you just throw that damn thing on the ground, boss?"

"You're going to die for this, Gene," Calini said, dropping the ice pick.

"Think this thing through, boss. I was trying to cover your ass. I didn't know if there was anything in that book that could hurt you. Things just went wrong."

"I'll put that on your tombstone."

Gene raised his gun slightly, holding it trained on Calini a moment longer, then he sighted, shook his head, and quickly backed out the barn by a side door. Little Mo followed at a gallop. Calini gave the nod to his remaining troops, and with guns drawn they exited also.

It didn't take long for the gunfire to start. It came rapidly, round after round, interspersed with shouts and cries. A couple of minutes at the most, then there was silence, a final *coup de grâce* round, and silence again.

Calini picked up the ice pick, wiping the dirt off with his handkerchief. "I guess I owe you, Benson."

"A ride back to the city will be thanks enough."

Calini nodded. "That works for me as far as you're concerned, but what about this punk here." He used the ice pick to point at Darrin.

"You don't have anything to worry about from him," Bull said.

"That's right," Darrin charged in. "I know how to keep my mouth shut."

"I wonder," Calini said, stepping over to Darrin, his eyes narrowing.

"Besides, we really haven't seen anything," Bull said. "Sure, we heard a little gunfire. But I can hear as much most Saturday nights standing outside my place."

That seemed to do the trick. Apparently Calini was looking for a reason not to kill them, and Bull, fortunately, had supplied him

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with one. Calini stepped back, returned the ice pick to his jacket pocket, and with a slight smile walked out.

It took Jadean nine days before she was released from the hospital. She and Jasmin moved in with Rayann, and she gave Darrin his walking papers, something Bull thought she should have done some time ago.

Otis's retirement party went off without a hitch. Jadean was there to give Bull an extra hand in the kitchen. Both separately and together Otis and Casey apologized to Jadean for not catching the guys who put her in the hospital. She told them not to worry about it, the perpetrators would pay for it someday, and she winked at Bull. He'd only told her and Sam of what went on in Calini's barn. She was owed an explanation, and he never kept anything from Sam.

Sam stood beside him now, behind the bar, toothpick in his mouth. "Ya know, I don't think I could ever retire."

"Good thing. I couldn't handle this place without you."

Sam looked up at him. "I always said ya lie good, Bull . . . thanks." ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

S	O	L	O	S	■	A	M	P	M	■	R	A	G	E
T	R	I	T	E	■	L	O	L	A	■	O	P	A	L
A	E	R	I	E	■	A	L	E	C	■	S	E	L	F
B	L	A	C	K	A	N	D	B	L	U	E	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	E	D	S	■	■	A	S	S	A	I	L
A	C	C	O	R	D	■	P	R	I	E	■	U	N	O
G	R	A	M	S	■	J	O	H	N	R	E	B	U	S
G	E	N	A	■	S	U	S	I	E	■	S	U	R	E
I	A	N	R	A	N	K	I	N	■	C	A	R	E	R
E	T	A	■	M	E	E	T	■	H	O	U	N	D	S
S	E	S	A	M	E	■	■	B	I	C	■	■	■	■
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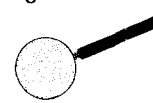

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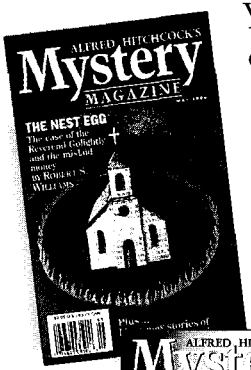

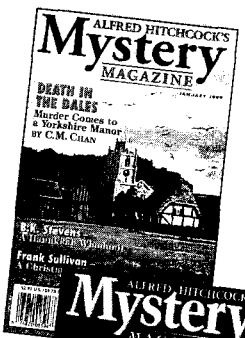

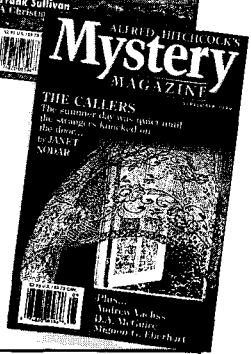

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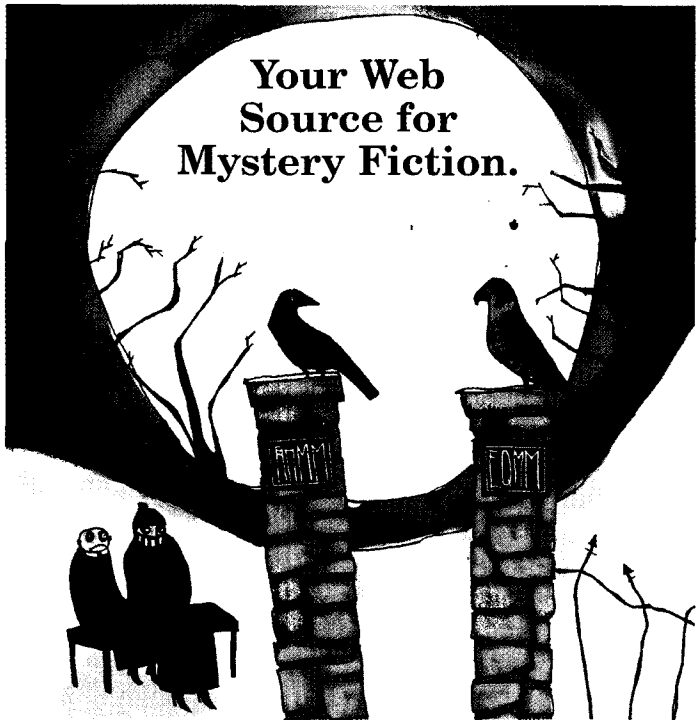

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